

**NEW**

16 MISSIONS THAT ENDED IN CARNAGE AND BLOODY DEFEAT

# Bringing History to Life

## Operation Market Garden 1944

German tanks were lying in wait for the Brits

## FATAL MILITARY BLUNDERS



**PEARL HARBOR 1941**  
Strategic catastrophe

### RUSSIA 1812

Napoleon's campaign led to icy ruin



### LITTLE BIG HORN 1876

Custer's Last Stand



**THE BAY OF PIGS 1961:** AMERICAN FORCES HUMILIATED IN CUBA

The first part of the paper discusses the importance of understanding the cultural context of the research. It highlights the need for researchers to be sensitive to the values and beliefs of the communities they are studying. This is particularly important in the field of education, where cultural differences can significantly impact learning outcomes.

The second part of the paper focuses on the methodology used in the study. It describes the qualitative approach adopted, which involves in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The researchers aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of the participants, rather than testing a specific hypothesis.

The third part of the paper presents the findings of the study. It discusses the themes that emerged from the data, such as the role of family in education and the influence of community norms. The researchers found that there were significant differences in the way that different cultural groups viewed education and the role of the teacher.

The fourth part of the paper discusses the implications of the findings for practice. It suggests that educators should be aware of the cultural context of their students and tailor their teaching accordingly. This might involve using different teaching methods or incorporating cultural knowledge into the curriculum.

The final part of the paper concludes the study and offers some thoughts for future research. It suggests that further exploration of the cultural context of education is needed, particularly in the area of teacher education and curriculum development.





# THE TRUE COST OF MILITARY BLUNDERS

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To err is human; to forgive, divine. At least that was Alexander Pope's view, but it's difficult to pardon mistakes where the cost in human life is so tragically steep, particularly when the perpetrator walks away with no more damage than a dented ego.

Sadly, military history is replete with such events: tactical errors, hasty decisions, misunderstandings, wishful thinking, stubbornness, lack of information and plain incompetence can all have disastrous consequences on the battlefield. In this special issue we've

selected some of history's most terrible military blunders. Our catalogue of mistakes begins with Scotland's 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' who haughtily ordered his exhausted troops into an ill-advised battle and ends with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, a conflict whose impact is still being felt today. In between there are accounts of staggering losses, tactical errors, misplaced courage and outright cowardice.

Read on now to discover exactly what went wrong and how it could have all been so easily avoided...

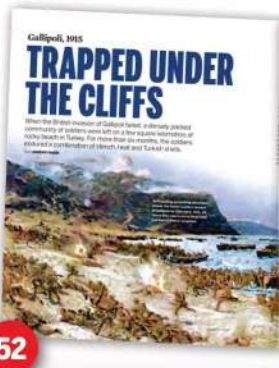
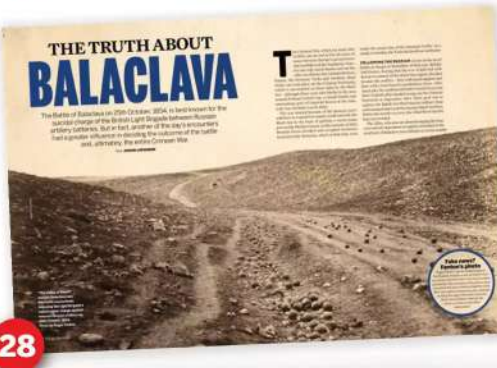
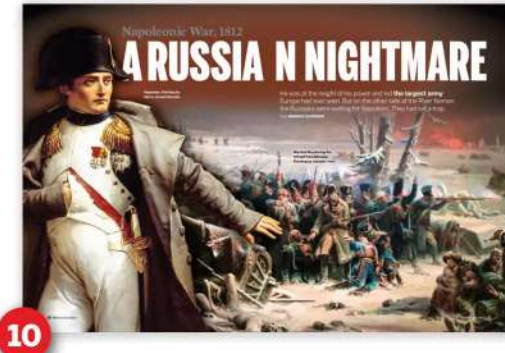
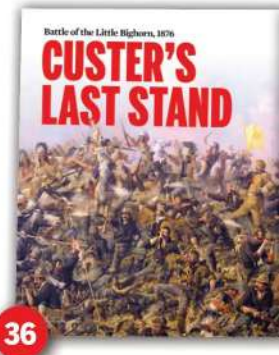
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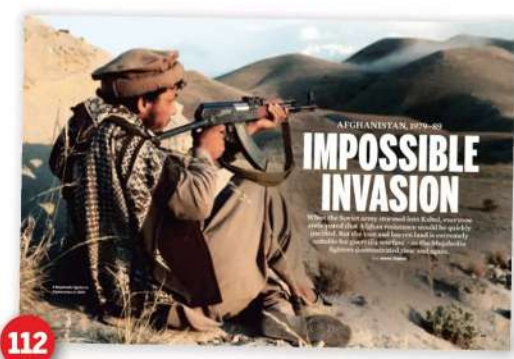
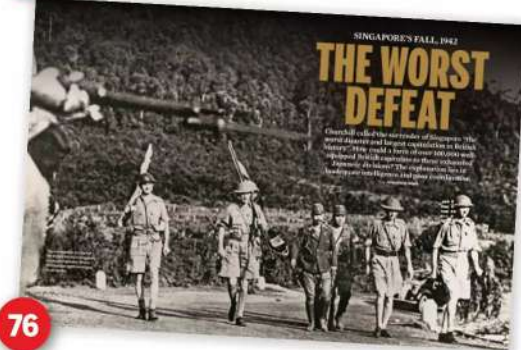
# MILITARY BLUNDERS

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Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812 is considered by many to be one of history's greatest military failures.







CULLODEN, 1746

# Final blow to the Scots

His advisers tried to stop him, but the Scottish pretender “Bonnie Prince Charlie” was determined to fight the English. The result was disastrous.

Text: **SARA GRIBERG**

**O**n the morning of 16th April, 1746 two armies met on a peat bog at Culloden, near Inverness in the Scottish Highlands. On one side were 8,000 rested and well-equipped soldiers fighting on the side of King George II and the British government in London. On the other, just under 7,000 starved and poorly organised Highlanders who had been marching through the dark all night.

A cold, biting wind blew over the sparse terrain, and the view was obscured by a stubborn rain that occasionally turned to sleet.

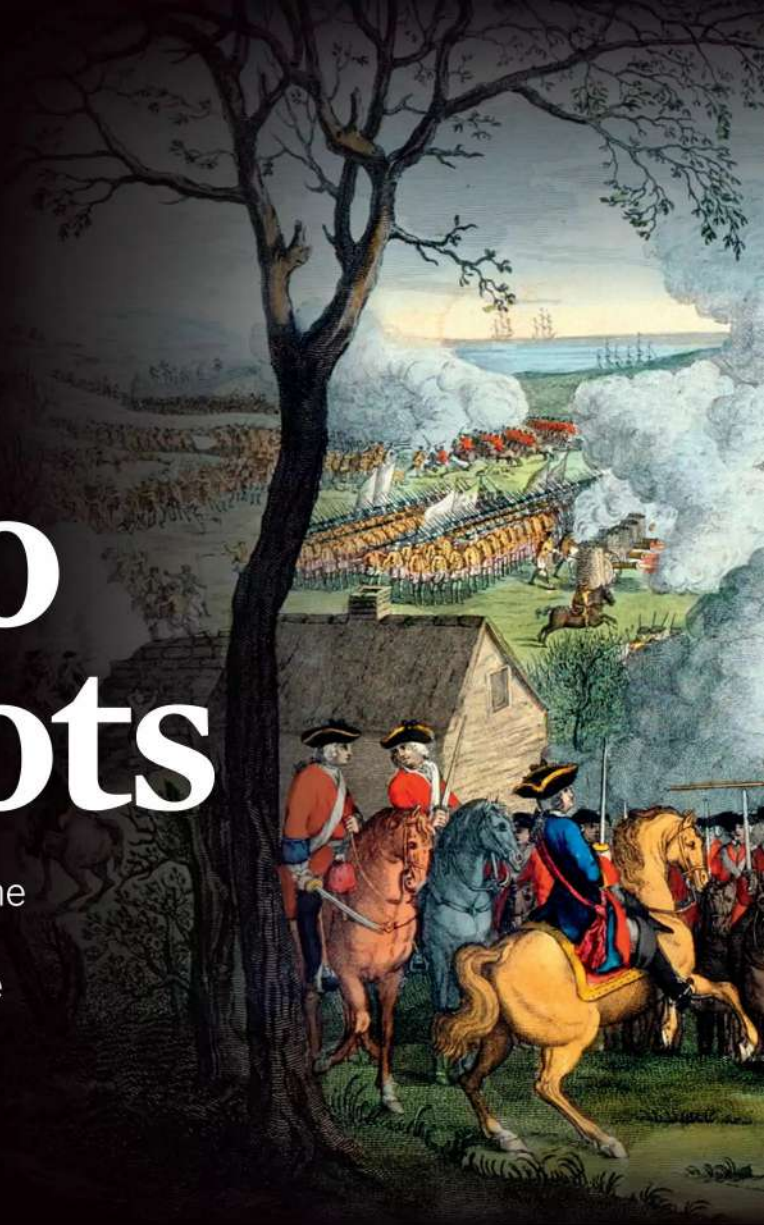
This rag-tag rebel army was led by none other than the 25-year-old pretender to the British throne, Charles Edward Stuart. The more level-headed of Charles’ advisers had counselled him not to attack, but the Stuart was convinced he would be victorious and refused to listen.

He rode around his men, impatiently urging them to form ranks. Then the bagpipes started and the

Highlanders, wearing kilts and plaids made from their individual clan’s tartan, prepared for battle.

The Battle of Culloden was the last pitched battle fought on British soil. It was also the Stuart dynasty’s final attempt to regain the throne. The rebels suffered a bitter defeat against the government army, but “Bonnie Prince Charlie” and his rebellion have nevertheless gained legendary status among patriotic Scots. The legend sprouted not least because of the brutal manhunt for surviving rebels conducted by the British after the battle, along with their subsequent ruthless repression of the Scottish Highland culture and its ancient clan system.

**THE STUART FAMILY** had sat on the Scottish throne since the 1300s. In 1603, King James VI – son of Mary Stuart – became King of England under the title James I. Both countries were then ruled in a personal union by James’ successors until the Glorious Revolution in 1688, when James II was





The Battle of Culloden on 16th April, 1746. Contemporary illustration.



## Opposing sides at Culloden

### British Army

**Commanding:**

William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland

**Force:** around 8,000 men

**Dead:** 50

**Wounded:** 259

### Jacobites

**Commanding:**

Charles Edward Stuart

**Force:** around 7,000 men

**Dead or wounded:**

1,500-2,000, 154 captured

**French:** 222 captured



ANN RONAN PICTURES/PRINT COLLECTOR/GETTY

deposed. The forces who continued to believe that the Stuarts were the rightful rulers of the British Isles were known as Jacobites after the deposed king's Latin name (Jacobus).

In 1707, the Acts of Union officially united England and Scotland into "One Kingdom by the Name of Great Britain". After an unsuccessful attempt to regain the throne in 1715 after the death of Queen Anne, the pretender James III went into exile on the continent. He lived first in France and later in Rome.

The Jacobites realised that the apathetic James, who went by the nickname "Old Mister Melancholy", was incapable of heading a revolutionary army. Instead, they focused their hopes on his eldest son, Charles Edward Stuart, "The Young Pretender", who was born in Rome in 1720. His moment came in 1745, when the British Army was occupied on the continent in the War of the Austrian Succession. The young "Bonnie Prince Charlie" and his faithful

## "Charles' advisers had counselled him not to attack"

followers expected France to invade southern England. Their plan was to march from Scotland on London at the same time as the landing and, with French help, reinstate a Stuart monarchy. The French invasion never materialised, however. Undeterred, Charles still travelled to Scotland, making landfall on 19th August, accompanied by a handful of men. He raised his standard in Glenfinnan and began the task of procuring weapons and raising an army.

**THE JACOBITES WERE** most strongly backed in the Scottish Highlands, where



Charles Edward Stuart, "Bonnie Prince Charlie".

SCOTTISH NATIONAL GALLERY



# CULLODEN, 1746

- ▶ the clan chiefs had almost unlimited power over their landlords and tenants. If the chief went to war, it was a matter of honour for all the clansmen – from wealthy nobles down to the poorest relation – to follow him into battle.

Charles was thus able to build an army as he marched south. In September, the rebels entered Edinburgh without encountering any resistance. Just east of the city, at Prestonpans, a government army tried to stop the Highlanders, but they were forced to retreat after a short and bloody battle.

The rebel army stayed in Edinburgh for six weeks to rally more soldiers to its cause. During that time, the government recalled its troops from Flanders to combat the growing threat from Scotland.

**IN NOVEMBER, THE** pretender's army marched south and came within 200 kilometres of London at Swarkestone Bridge south of Derby. The rebels' aim had been to recruit more volunteers as they travelled through England and thus become strong enough to occupy the capital. But support for the Jacobite cause was considerably weaker than they had thought, and the numbers of new recruits was disappointing.

The British, for their part, had strengthened their defences, and the prince was forced to concede that any attack on London would be doomed to

## “Support for the Jacobite cause was... weaker than they had thought”

failure. The army therefore turned on its heel and went north again to winter in Scotland, waiting for the reinforcements they hoped would come from France. At Falkirk, near Glasgow, the rebels clashed with another small army of government soldiers, who, again, were forced to withdraw.

As Charles and his men set up winter camps in Inverness, a larger British army marched north with the aim of putting an end to the rebellious Highlanders once and for all. It was also led by a young prince: William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland, the third son of George II of the House of Hanover, which had supplanted the Stuarts on the throne in 1714. On 15th April, 1746, the British forces camped at Culloden to celebrate the Duke's 25th birthday.

The Highlanders had little food and clothing, and the prince's officers advised him not to attack. They felt that the men were in poor condition and that the marshy terrain was unfavourable to the “Highland charge”, a battlefield shock tactic that was the Highlanders' specialty. But Charles was determined to attack, believing a night-time assault against the British would be the best strategy. As a result, the rebel soldiers were forced to advance in darkness, causing disarray in the ranks. Worse, they arrived too late to take the enemy in their beds. By the time Charles had finally assembled his army, it was 13.00 and Cumberland's troops were already set up and ready for battle.

**THE REBEL ARMY** consisted mostly of Highlanders who grouped according to clan affiliation, but during the winter they'd also been reinforced by Irishmen in French service. The rebels' disastrous fate was sealed the moment their artillery fired. The cannon were manned by untrained Highlanders. As a result, they miscalculated the elevation of the barrels and their shots sailed high over Cumberland's ranks, landing in the rear where they did little damage.

The British three-pounder cannons and mortars, on the other hand, were well-served and effective, felling the rebels like bloody skittles.

The Highlanders were waiting for orders to attack. But when the order finally came, the British cannonade had already thinned out their ranks considerably. The rebels charged with muskets and broadswords, but then their left flank lost its way in the swampy terrain. It was forced to change direction, becoming trapped in the bog.

In less than an hour, around 1,200 Jacobites were killed and 800 wounded. At the same time,

DAVID MORIER



**William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland.**



**Typical Highland garb, with a tartan plaid worn over the body, was banned after the uprising was crushed.**





government forces restricted their own losses to just over 300: 50 dead and 260 wounded.

The rebels were forced to retreat but were chased by government soldiers who shot down the fleeing Jacobites. The soldiers even killed wounded enemies who were left on the battlefield. The Duke of Cumberland, who ordered the persecution, was later dubbed “The Butcher” because of the massacres carried out on his orders in the search of rebel sympathisers. Even members of the Tory opposition party in parliament were appalled at his actions.

**AFTER A FEW** unsuccessful attempts to rally his scattered army, Charles was forced to send a message to his officers that each had to “shift for himself as best he could”, the prince spent the next five months on the run with some of his closest men, first around the Highlands and then hopping across islands in the Outer Hebrides. In September, a French ship finally came to his rescue.

There are many romantic stories and legends about the many Scots who, putting their own lives in danger, hid and assisted Charles during his escape despite the British government placing a £30,000 bounty on his head. Charles Edward Stuart never returned to Scotland and eventually died in Rome in 1788.

In the Scottish Highlands, the hunt for the rebels and their sympathisers continued long afterwards. Reprisals extended beyond imprisoning, torturing or executing those soldiers who’d taken part; their families were also subjected to cruel treatment.

The government also introduced a series of laws to crush the rebellious Highlands once and for all. Jacobite chieftains and lords were deprived of their titles. The Highlanders were not allowed to own weapons, and clan tartans, kilts and plaids were all outlawed. Scots flouting this law could expect to be imprisoned or, if caught a second time, transported to the colonies for life. ❏

**Sara Griberg** is a freelance journalist and author.

**On 18th August, 1746, Londoners gathered to witness the execution of the rebel leaders.**

**Further reading:**  
**Culloden** (2002) by John Prebble.  
★ **The Highland Clearances** (1982) by John Prebble.

## French troops were recruited in Sweden

★ In the autumn of 1745, three French envoys arrived in Sweden on a secret mission. Their intention was to put together a band of Swedish officers to send to Scotland to assist Charles Edward Stuart in his revolt against the British. As a suitable shipping port, they chose Gothenburg, where there was a substantial colony of Scottish traders.

**SWEDISH KING** Frederick I hid behind Swedish neutrality but couldn’t prevent Swedes from voluntarily joining French service. A Swedish force was recruited under great secrecy. Including regular privates, it was estimated the French force numbered between 600 and 700 in January 1746. They were put up by various citizens ahead of their departure. At the same time, a ship – the *Fredericus Rex Sueciae* – was purchased, its buyers reported to be the directors of the Swedish East India Company, Niklas Sahlgren and Colin Campbell, a Scot.



**Colin Campbell.**

The intention was for the *Fredericus Rex Sueciae* to sail with the force at the end of January, but due to the extreme cold, the ship lay frozen in port. In addition, there were problems in obtaining weapons. When Stuart’s army was crushed in Culloden in April, the French force had still not yet left Gothenburg.

Most of the Swedes enlisted instead went to France, where they would form a battalion in the Royal Suédois regiment.

**HOWEVER, THE** Gothenburg citizens’ commitment to the Stuart rebels did not end. Scots in the city organised actions to help their countrymen flee to Sweden. At least 45 rebels came to Gothenburg at various times after the defeat at Culloden. Some of them remained in Sweden, but most were helped to travel on to France by Campbell among others.



Napoleonic War, 1812

# A RUSSIA

Napoleon. Painting by  
Merry-Joseph Blondel.





# N NIGHTMARE

He was at the height of his power and led **the largest army** Europe had ever seen. But on the other side of the River Neman, the Russians were waiting for Napoleon. They had set a trap.

Text: **MAGNUS OLOFSSON**

Marshal Ney during the retreat from Moscow.  
Painting by Adolphe Yvon.





# NAPOLEON IN RUSSIA

**I**t was 25th June, 1812. Over 400,000 soldiers had gathered beside the River Neman to invade Russia. One witness remembered the crossing.

“Each regiment marched behind its band, which played fanfares that mingled with cries of “Vive l’Empereur!” As there were no enemy troops to fight, it looked like an immense military parade.”

Another was struck by all the splendour.

“All the finest men in full dress, all the most beautiful horses of Europe were brought together there under our eyes... The sun shone on the bronze of twelve hundred cannon ready to destroy everything; it shone on the breasts of our superb carabiniers with their gilded helmets and scarlet manes; it shone on gold, on silver, on the tempered steel of helmets, of breastplates, of the weapons of men and officers, on their rich uniforms.”

The Grande Armée’s men were sure that victory would follow. And why not? Here was the largest army Europe had ever seen, led by the greatest army commander of his time, Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte. The enemy was weaker and didn’t have an invincible military ‘genius’ at its head. On paper, they couldn’t lose, but they weren’t fighting on paper: barely six months later, a tiny fraction of this mighty, magnificent army stumbled back over the Neman. Those who survived were dressed in rags swarming with lice. They stank of urine and excrement; they were sick and demoralised.

On the other side of the Neman, a trap had been set. Tsar Alexander I and his generals had done their homework. They knew that Napoleon wanted to decide everything quickly, with one of his famous set-piece battles. They also knew that the French had struggled in Spain against Wellington who sidestepped such major confrontations, forcing the French into long, weary marches before turning to meet them from behind fortified positions. The upcoming campaign would be a showdown between

## “The peace angered many in the Russian aristocracy”

an offensive style of warfare of pitched battles and frontal assaults and a Fabian strategy of attrition, where direct confrontation would be avoided in the hope of eventually wearing down the enemy. The latter approach won, but the cost in human life was huge, even for the victor.

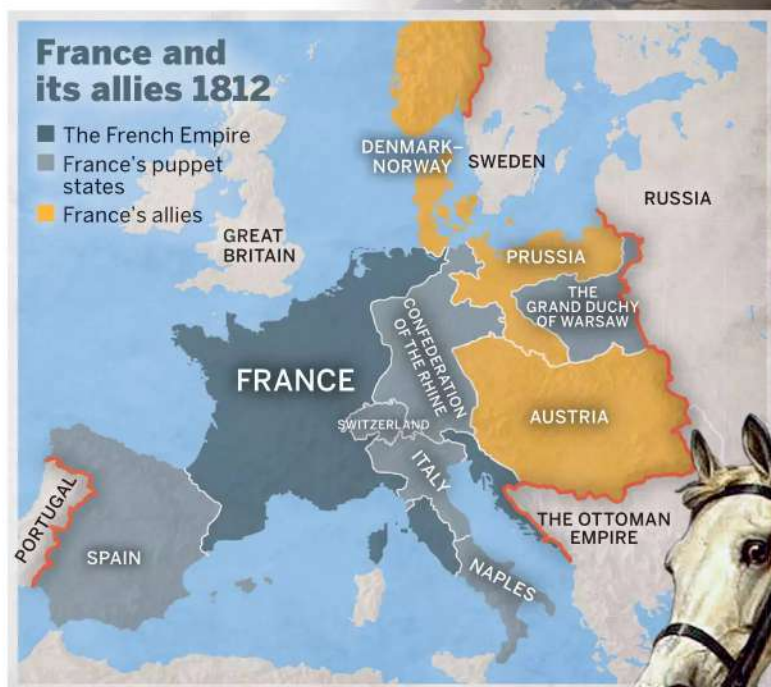
**IN THE SUMMER** of 1812, Napoleon was at the height of his power. Between 1805 and 1809, he had gone through Europe like a steamroller. Power after power succumbed, and Europe’s map was redrafted according to his wishes. A shattered Prussia was forced to give up half its territory, a defeated Austria one-fifth, a mauled Russia fled in terror. Both France’s territory and the Emperor’s waistline grew with each success. Eventually, the country included Catalonia, Belgium and the Netherlands, parts of Italy and Germany, as well as some corners of Slovenia and Croatia. This ‘supersized France’ shared borders with both Denmark and Montenegro. Added to that were several puppet states. Spain and Italy were ruled by Napoleon’s relatives; Switzerland and a handful of small German states were vassals, while the rest of Germany was gathered in the Confederation of the Rhine under the Emperor’s ‘protection’. Further east, Napoleon had graciously restored parts of Poland as a duchy. Denmark, Prussia and Austria were his allies, more or less voluntarily. Europe hadn’t seen such a vast empire for 1,000 years.

But there were cracks in the foundation of Napoleon’s empire. The way the emperor had

**Napoleon planned to break British dominance of the world seas with a trade blockade.**







clipped Austria's wings and humiliated Prussia had led to widespread hostility. It seemed impossible to defeat the uprising in Spain. And then there was Great Britain. The naval defeat at Trafalgar in 1805 had made it impossible for the French fleet to successfully challenge its arch enemy. Instead, Napoleon tried to break Britain with the Continental System, a trade embargo that aimed to block all British trade with Europe. "The Continental System is uppermost in his mind...too much so, perhaps", wrote Napoleon's secretary in 1811.

**FOR SOME YEARS,** Russia reluctantly supported the blockade. The arch-conservative country had been an enemy of revolutionary France since the 1790s. However, the Wars of the Third Coalition and the Fourth Coalition that broke out in 1805 ended in consternation for Russia. During the peace negotiations in Tilsit in 1807, Alexander was forced to commit himself to the Continental System to avoid an invasion of the motherland. The peace angered many in the Russian aristocracy, who refused to reconcile themselves to French republicanism and harboured dreams of Imperial Russia as a superpower. Ultimately, Alexander could not stand against such sentiments without risking his crown.

Alexander didn't trust Napoleon, either. After 1807, he strengthened his army sector by sector: equipment, training, tactics, staffing. Soon, the Russian army was bigger and stronger than ever.

In the long run, it was unsustainable for Russia to remain in the Continental System. It caused the country's foreign trade to collapse and the



The Russian emperor Alexander I did not trust Napoleon and pulled out of the Continental System in 1810.





Charles XIV John, crown prince of Sweden. By Fredric Westin.

## Nordic politics, 1812

★ When French-born Marshal Bernadotte was unexpectedly elected heir-presumptive to Sweden's childless and ageing king in 1810, many Swedes hoped that their new royal warlord would – with Napoleon's help – recapture Finland, lost to their enemy, Russia, in 1808–09. But no such war came. The new crown prince, who, because of King Charles XIII's failing health, acted as regent from the time of his nomination, was initially cautious in state affairs. When he did act, he chose to ally with Russia (to conquer Norway), rather than with France (to conquer Finland).

Bernadotte read the wider political situation far better than the French emperor. He suspected that Napoleon's empire was built on sand; he also realised that Russia would always aim to control Finland, and were strong

enough to defy Swedish claims. He therefore kept Napoleon at arm's length, while cosying up to his Russian connections.

In 1812, Napoleon occupied the Pomerania region in Sweden in order to close a gap in the Continental System. Bernadotte took advantage of the hostile mood this engendered in Sweden to ally with Russia. Sweden waived all claims on Finland and pledged to join the battle against Napoleon in exchange for Russian help in conquering Norway. Although it took until the summer of 1813 before Sweden went to war, Bernadotte's reorientation of Sweden's foreign policy nevertheless had a significant impact on the 1812 campaign, because it allowed the Russians to redeploy forces from Finland to fight the French.

▶ value of the rouble plummeted. Luxuries could be smuggled in to satisfy the nobles, but the country's most important export goods – timber, cereal and hemp – were too bulky for clandestine trading. The state's finances were crashing due to hyperinflation. On New Year's Eve, 1810, matters came to a head: Alexander issued an *ukase* (an imperial decree) that opened Russian ports to British exports.

The Russians' withdrawal from the Continental System was a slap in the face for Napoleon, who had also received reports of Russia's military build-up. He did not want a war with Russia, but while a large Russian force was gathered on Poland's border, he didn't dare send his armies into the field in Spain to solve his problems on the Iberian Peninsula once and for all. He distrusted Alexander as much as Alexander distrusted him and was equally reluctant to compromise. His decision to go to war against Russia was based on this suspicion. The reason was to compel Russia to rejoin the Continental System and accept France's dominion in Europe.

**IN THE SPRING** of 1811, Napoleon began to reinforce the troops in the eastern parts of his empire. The rearmament continued until the summer of 1812. The French army demanded tens of thousands of horses, hundreds of thousands of muskets and millions of cartridges. Rations and animal feed were stockpiled. Finally, the largest field army Europe had seen was assembled in East Prussia and Poland. The main force numbered around 450,000 men. Napoleon intended to lead it himself in a swift, decisive offensive against Vilnius. The northern flank was covered by Marshal Jacques MacDonald's German-Polish-Prussian corps of 32,000 soldiers and the southern by the Austrian Auxiliary Corps with 34,000 under the command of Marshal Karl Phillippe Schwarzenberg, an Austrian prince. In Poland and Germany, two entire army corps were being held in reserve, and thousands of recruits were marching towards the front.

Some of Napoleon's inner circle tried to dissuade him from going to war. Russia was strong – and huge! From Paris to the Russian border at the River Neman it was 1,500 kilometres, from Neman to Moscow another 950.

Napoleon swept away all objections. "His capitals are as accessible as any others, and when I have the capitals, I hold everything." Napoleon, however, was not an idiot. He had studied Swedish King Charles XII's catastrophic invasion of 1708–09 and knew that war in Russia was a completely different matter than in Italy, Germany or even Spain, where troops could advance along good roads and requisition provisions from towns and villages. Western Russia had few roads and was sparsely populated. It was the same in eastern Prussia and Poland. "We shall



have to carry everything with us", Napoleon told his marshals. He expanded the supply corps to 26 battalions with 9,336 wagons and nearly 40,000 horses. Never before had he overseen such logistics, but he was full of confidence as he went to war.

**THANKS TO HIS** excellent spies, Alexander was well acquainted with Napoleon's preparations. On 9th April, 1812, he left St Petersburg to go to Vilnius, to be nearer his armies. His forces grew enormously over the next few months. The force at the front eventually totalled 242,000 men. This was divided into the 1st Army under Minister of War General Barclay de Tolly, the 2nd Army under General Pyotr Bagration and the 3rd Army under General Alexander Tormasov. North of Riga was a corps of 38,000 soldiers, and behind the front were 65,000 reservists and recruits. More reinforcements could be expected if Alexander could ally with Sweden and sign a peace treaty with the Ottoman Empire.

**THE TSAR'S STAFF** was carefree that spring. "We held balls and parties... [Our stay] in Vilna resembled a pleasure trip rather than preparations for war", wrote one colonel. Others wanted to attack Napoleon before he had gathered his full force.

Alexander, however, was not interested. There was an alternative plan, one that Barclay de Tolly had been polishing since 1807. It drew inspiration from Fabius Cunctator's campaign against Carthage

## "Napoleon swept away all objections"

in 217 BC, Peter the Great's campaign against the Swedish invasion of Russia in 1708 and Wellington's war against the French in Spain, ongoing since 1808.

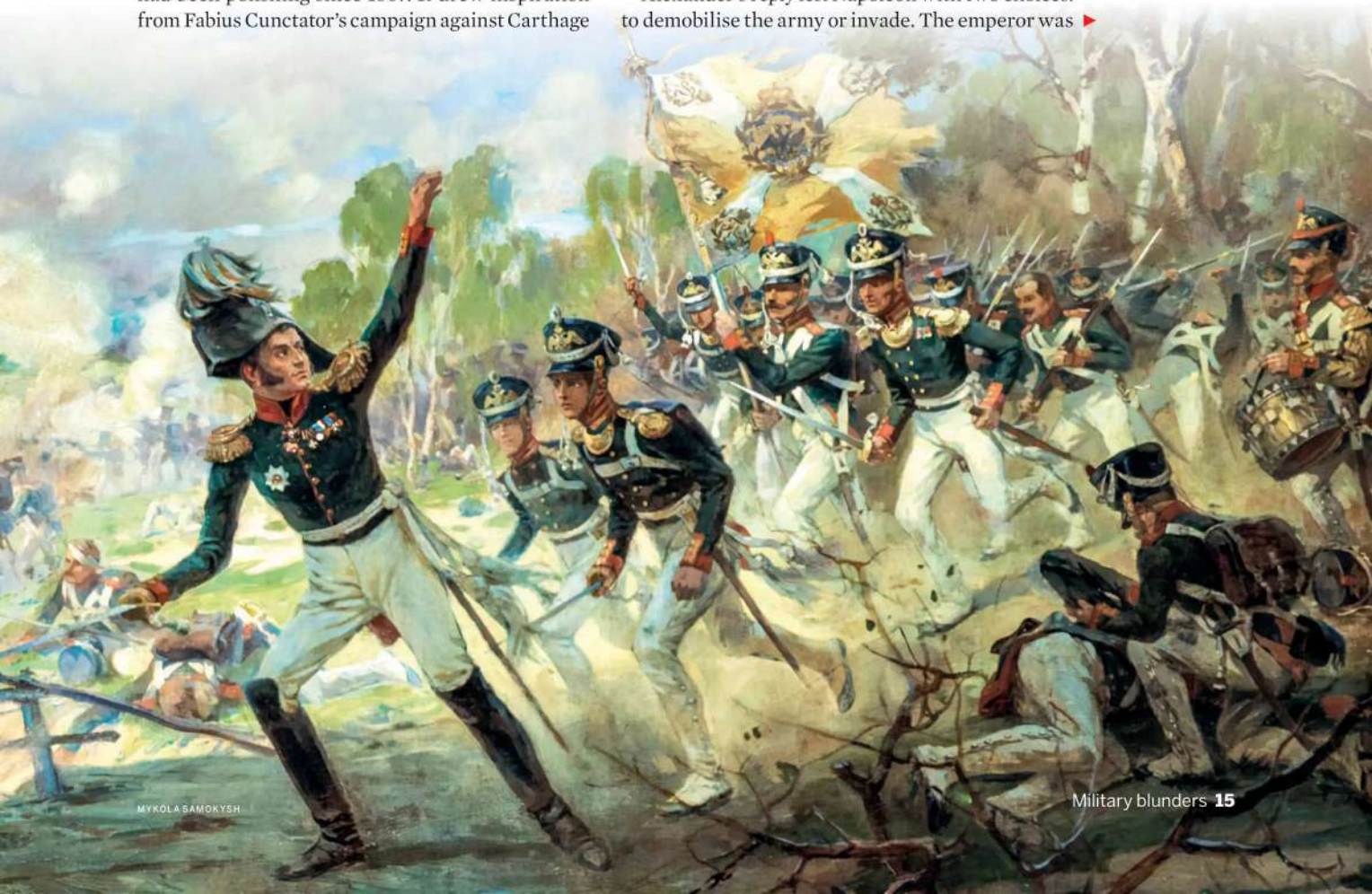
The plan was to avoid major clashes with the tactically skilled French army by continually falling back and letting supply problems, along with the superior Russian light cavalry, gradually wear them down. Only when Alexander's army was approaching its depots deep inside Russia, would it be time to meet the Grande Armée on the battlefield.

In May, Alexander received an invitation to negotiate from Napoleon. There was a strong anti-French feeling in Russia's court at the time, and many of the nobles were scheming to overthrow the tsar. Dissolving his newly mobilised army would lose him considerable prestige, which could cost him both the crown and his life. Besides, Alexander had no reason to believe that Napoleon was sincere.

"Tell the Emperor that I will not be the aggressor", Alexander told the French envoy. "He can cross the Neman; but never will I sign a peace dictated on Russian territory." If Napoleon wanted to negotiate, he had to first withdraw behind the Rhine.

Alexander's reply left Napoleon with two choices: to demobilise the army or invade. The emperor was ▶

**General Nikolay Raevsky leads his men during the Battle of Saltanovka on 23rd July, 1812. The battle ended in French victory.**





# NAPOLEON IN RUSSIA



**The Grande Armée crosses the River Neman. Illustration by Felician Myrbach.**

▶ never one to back away from a confrontation and was not afraid of a war with Russia. Full of confidence, he boasted widely about his forthcoming victory.

While Napoleon dined and danced with Europe's elite, many of his soldiers were already starving. Poland's miserable roads had prevented 10,000 supply wagons reaching the troops. And even if the rations had made it through, they would have been insufficient. The stores of local peasants were looted to the last by hungry soldiers. "This huge army, which flowed through Prussia like a flood, consumed all the resources of the earth", General Dumas recalled.

In his memoirs, Private Jakob Walter wrote:

"Daily hardships increased, and there was no hope of bread. My colonel spoke to us once and said that we could hope for no more bread until we had

crossed the enemy border. The most anyone might still get was a little lean beef, and hunger made it necessary to dig up the fields for the potatoes already sprouting, which were however, very sweet and almost inedible."

There was not enough food to go around. Walter heard rumours of people committing suicide to escape their torment. Many more became ill and died, others deserted. And all this while the Grande Armée was still on the march, in their own territory, before the campaign started.

**AS NAPOLEON APPROACHED** the theatre of the war, he began to realise that there were grave deficiencies in the troops' supplies. As a result, speed became a major factor in his battle plans.

The idea was simple. In the north, MacDonald was ordered to advance to Riga, and in the south Schwarzenberg was ordered to tie up Tormasov's 3rd Army. He, himself, would settle the war with an advance against Vilnius with the main force.

## "The soldiers behaved like Attila's hordes"





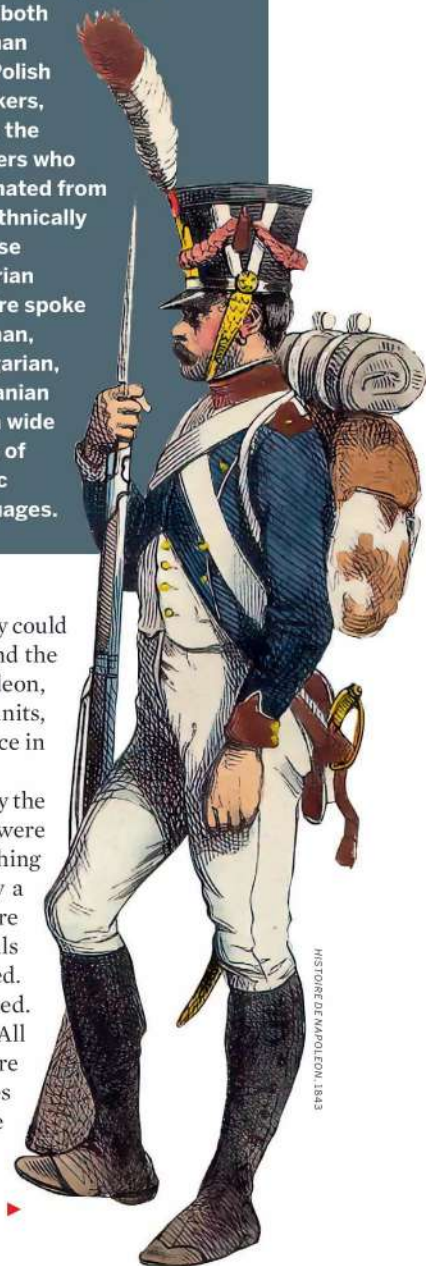
## Army of many nationalities

★ In Russia, Napoleon's Grande Armée was known as "the army of twenty tongues". It was no exaggeration. Although a large number of the soldiers had been born in France, many of Napoleon's troops didn't speak French as a first language – there were entire regiments who were enlisted from the Flemish, Walloon, Northern German and Northern Italian territories that were now seen as a part of France. Several 'French' regiments even consisted of Polish soldiers.

The German vassal states and the Confederation of the Rhine mobilised up to 100,000 Germans while the Grand Duchy of Warsaw sent about 80,000 Poles.

The Neapolitan and Italian armies lined up with tens of thousands more men, all

of whom spoke Italian as their mother tongue. From the Iberian Peninsula came a few thousand Spaniards and Portuguese, while the Balkans contributed Croats, Illyrians and Dalmatians. In the 20,000-strong Prussian Auxiliary Corps there were both German and Polish speakers, while the soldiers who originated from the ethnically diverse Austrian Empire spoke German, Hungarian, Romanian and a wide array of Slavic languages.



The supply problems meant that he had only three weeks to achieve his objective. Even then, tens of thousands of his men and horses were lost over the next 20 days, most without ever seeing a Russian.

On the morning of 24th June, 1812, the soldiers of the Grande Armée were presented with a grandiose proclamation penned by the Emperor himself. It described the frailty of the Russian force and predicted that the imminent war would "be glorious for French arms".

"Vive L'Empereur" shouted the troops stationed along the Neman. It was still possible to believe in victory and Napoleon's greatness.

At 22.00, three companies from the 13th Light Infantry Regiment crossed the Neman to protect military engineers who had begun to build three bridges. The war had started.

The Grande Armée advanced through a wooded, unspoilt landscape. The few locals who inhabited the wilderness fled as the army approached. Napoleon's plan was to encircle and defeat the armies of

Bagration and Barclay de Tolly before they could combine. But there were no signposts, and the distances involved were huge. Napoleon, usually so assured in his coordination of units, was struggling to manage such a vast force in a landscape bereft of markers.

The soldiers were alternately plagued by the heat and heavy rain. The supply wagons were further delayed and there was hardly anything to eat, for people or animals. After only a few days of campaigning, 30,000 men were crowding the hastily erected field hospitals and the horses began to die from lack of feed.

It wasn't long before discipline suffered. The soldiers behaved like Attila's hordes. "All around the city and in the countryside there were extraordinary excesses... Churches were plundered... and women were violated", wrote a Vilnius noblewoman who witnessed the events. Draconian punishments were ineffective in such ▶



# NAPOLEON IN RUSSIA



**The Battle of Borodino was a Pyrrhic victory for Napoleon.**

► desperate circumstances. Tens of thousands of soldiers deserted, becoming wild bandits.

**THE RUSSIANS WERE** still nowhere to be seen. Alexander knew that his strength at the front was only half as great as Napoleon's. They stuck to their plan: falling back in good order. The soldiers brought their wounded and sick with them and took or burned any possible food supplies as they retreated, leaving nothing for the enemy. But while the war went Russia's way in many respects, there were setbacks.

On 11th July, the 1st Army marched to a fortified position that had been established in Drissa. The idea was to hold the Grande Armée there while the 2nd Army threatened French supply lines. The plan failed, however, because Napoleon's force was already at Drissa, in a position between the

1st and 2nd Armies, and it was strong enough to force both to withdraw. The retreat continued. Barclay de Tolly and Bagration were ordered to combine their armies as quickly as possible, while Alexander headed to St Petersburg to handle the home front.

The Russian soldiers moving towards their depots didn't suffer any food shortages. The situation was

different for the Grande Armée. A French general wrote to the King of Bavaria that "as soon as we had crossed the Vistula all regular supplies and normal distribution of food ceased." During the journey to Moscow, his soldiers received no meat, bread or liquor. Malnutrition, dehydration and dysentery carved deep holes in the ranks.

The Grande Armée left a stinking trail of corpses and carcasses in its wake. By the time it reached Vitebsk in late July, it had lost a third of its strength without having fought a single battle.

**IN VITEBSK, NAPOLEON** held war councils. Several of his advisers wanted him to hold there. But Napoleon was a gambler. The Russian army was near Smolensk. He would attack it, crush it and win his peace. However, this task became more difficult when Barclay de Tolly and Bagration finally managed to unite their armies in early August. That Napoleon had failed to defeat them individually was a kind of victory. But now the Russian army was on home soil and Barclay de Tolly was put under pressure to go on the offensive.

Against his better judgement, he made a half-hearted attempt, only to run into the full force of the Grande Armée. Instead of manoeuvring to cut off Russian forces, Napoleon went for a frontal attack. Military theorist Clausewitz, who took part in the campaign, believed that this was the emperor's



**French artillery helped win the victory at Borodino.**



biggest mistake of the war and cost him the chance to surround and crush the enemy's main force.

After three days of fighting around Smolensk, the Russians managed to escape. In doing so, they put their worst mistake behind them, emerging battered but not broken. Napoleon was back to square one. Voices rose up around him: he should stay in Smolensk for the winter, restore army discipline and organise the troops' supplies.

His flanks were also beginning to look ragged. In the north, MacDonald's forces were stuck in Riga, where another 19,000 Russian soldiers who had been released from the occupation of Finland following a new Russian alliance with Sweden were on their way. And in the south, Admiral Pavel Chichagov was approaching with 50,000 Russian veterans who had been released for new duties when Alexander – in an even-greater diplomatic triumph – made peace with the Ottoman Empire.

But for Napoleon, a stop in Smolensk would be akin to defeat. Besides, it would be no easy matter to maintain the army for a whole winter so far into Russia. Moscow was just over a week away. Surely the Russians would stop and defend Russia's spiritual heart? He decided once again to take a chance and try to win that crucial victory.

The Grande Armée marched into a man-made wasteland. Russia had emptied the villages and towns of people and animals, food and feed, then set the houses on fire. As they fell back, their ranks swelled with new recruits.

The Russians continued to follow their plan, but the constant retreats were starting to erode confidence in Barclay de Tolly, who was also

quarrelling with Bagration. The tsar, knowing that the pair's disagreement in the midst of a campaign could have disastrous consequences, ordered the cunning veteran general Mikhail Kutuzov to leave his peaceful retirement to take command of the Russian main force. Kutuzov had not been at the front many days before he decided to stop and fight. The result was the massacre at Borodino on 7th September, 1812.

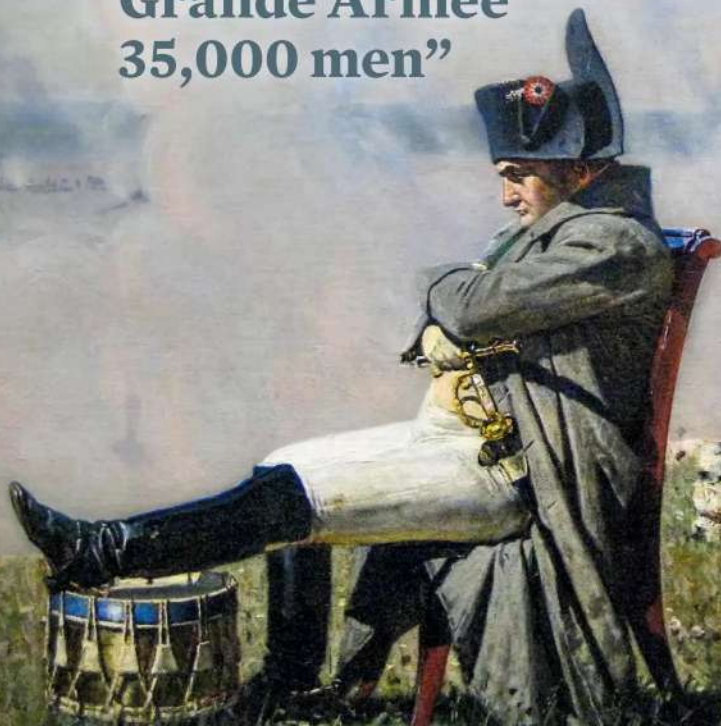
**AT BORODINO, KUTUZOV** lined up 150,000 fit and rested soldiers against Napoleon's 130,000 exhausted veterans. Napoleon's army was too weak to attempt the kind of extensive operations the emperor usually favoured. Besides, Napoleon believed that such an approach would only give the Russians the chance to slip away again. This time he decided to go for an all-out frontal attack.

The clashes that day showed that the Grande Armée was still an effective combat machine. The French artillery could hardly avoid Kutuzov's compact formations. Soon, the Russian armies were in full retreat, and there were gaping holes in their ranks.

According to text-book warfare, Napoleon should now have put in his rested reserves, his famous Old Guard, to crush the enemy completely. But the shock troops never came. Napoleon feared that the Russian army still ►

**Napoleon at Borodino.**  
Painting by  
Vasily Vereshchagin.

**“The day cost the  
Grande Armée  
35,000 men”**





# NAPOLEON IN RUSSIA



- had enough of a sting in its tail to decimate the Old Guard, and if the Old Guard was defeated, the entire battle could be lost. He couldn't take that chance this deep into Russia.

**THE DAY COST** the Grande Armée 35,000 men versus more than 45,000 for the Russian forces. Napoleon had finally won his battle – but it was a Pyrrhic victory.

The battered Russian forces fell back to Moscow, in too poor a state to venture into another battle. They began to leave the city a week later on 14th September. “Officers and men wept with rage”, wrote one Russian officer.

The next morning, the French vanguard under Marshal Murat appeared. But a headstrong Russian general threatened to torch the city if they advanced before the Russians finished their withdrawal. Believing the war to be all-but won, Murat accepted a temporary cease-fire. The last Russian troops escaped Moscow undisturbed. Many on both sides, high and low, now began to think the war was over. A defeated Russian lieutenant described it as “The last day of Russia.”

On 15th September, Napoleon entered Moscow. The spiritual heart of the Russian empire was at his mercy. While the soldiers looted everything they could, Napoleon installed himself in the Kremlin, to await a peace offer from Alexander. The days passed, but the tsar remained silent.

Napoleon was at a loss. There were no obvious targets for continued military operations. His

thin supply lines were raided by deserters who consumed the limited rations and demoralised those soldiers who had not starved to death on their way to Moscow.

The French emperor, however, hesitated to recognise the cause as lost; a retreat would destroy the aura of invincibility that surrounded him and shake his empire to its foundations. He sent Alexander a letter requesting negotiations – there was no reply.

In September, Alexander had devised a plan for his forces on the north and south flanks to circle behind the Grande Armée while Kutuzov's army hit it head on, driving it backwards. The goal was the total destruction of the French main army. It is strange that Alexander, who had no great talent for warfare, saw the opportunity, while Napoleon remained blind to the threat. Napoleon's desire for peace negotiations only strengthened the tsar's belief that the war was going according to plan.

The days passed in diplomatic silence. The Grande Armée had enough food in Moscow, but no animal feed. The farmers in the area resisted the patrols sent to secure it. The farmers' wives also took part in the ambushes and fighting. Prisoners were tortured and killed.

“People became worse than wild animals and killed each other with incredible cruelty”, a Russian police officer testified.

The peasant fighters soon received support from partisan groups – consisting of regular light cavalry and Cossacks – who raided the supply lines. When





the Grande Armée finally left Moscow, it had lost around 15,000 men to peasants and partisans.

**FOR THE RUSSIAN** main army, the pause in the fighting was a godsend. The defeat at Borodino and the retreat from Moscow had caused morale to plummet. It also disrupted discipline, but the problems didn't last. At Tarutino, south-west of Moscow, Kutuzov ordered the troops to hold. The neighbourhood was rich and supplies poured in. While Napoleon killed time in Moscow, the Russians used the time to strengthen their men.

Barclay de Tolly also gave pep-talks to his regiments, explaining that everything was going to plan. At the same time, the ranks were filled with reinforcements. Morale rose again. At the beginning of October, the army numbered 88,000 regular soldiers and 28,000 irregular cavalry. On 18th October, Kutuzov went on the offensive – planning to catch the Grande Armée, which was finally withdrawing from Moscow.

Five days earlier, on 13th October, snow had fallen over Moscow, waking Napoleon from his torpor. Until then, he had rejected the threat of the approaching winter, but now, finally, he realised the seriousness of the situation. He began issuing orders. "Let's speed it up. We must be in winter quarters in twenty days."

However, the preparations took time. On 19th October, 95,000 soldiers and half as many thieves, prostitutes and refugees marched out of Moscow. The retreat had begun. Morale was high: the

soldiers had eaten well in Moscow and were happily carrying away a considerable portion of the Moscow residents' belongings on thousands of wagons.

Napoleon had planned to return to Smolensk by a new route, along the Kaluga road, which ran through more densely populated areas. However, the road was blocked by Kutuzov's army. On 24th October, the French and Russian vanguards met at the Maloyaroslavets in a battle that ended with both Napoleon and Kutuzov sounding the retreat.

After two days of indecision, a defeated Napoleon switched his line of retreat. The operation had cost the Grande Armée nine days of supplies – and in the end it had to retreat the same way it had come, through a scorched wasteland without hope of food.

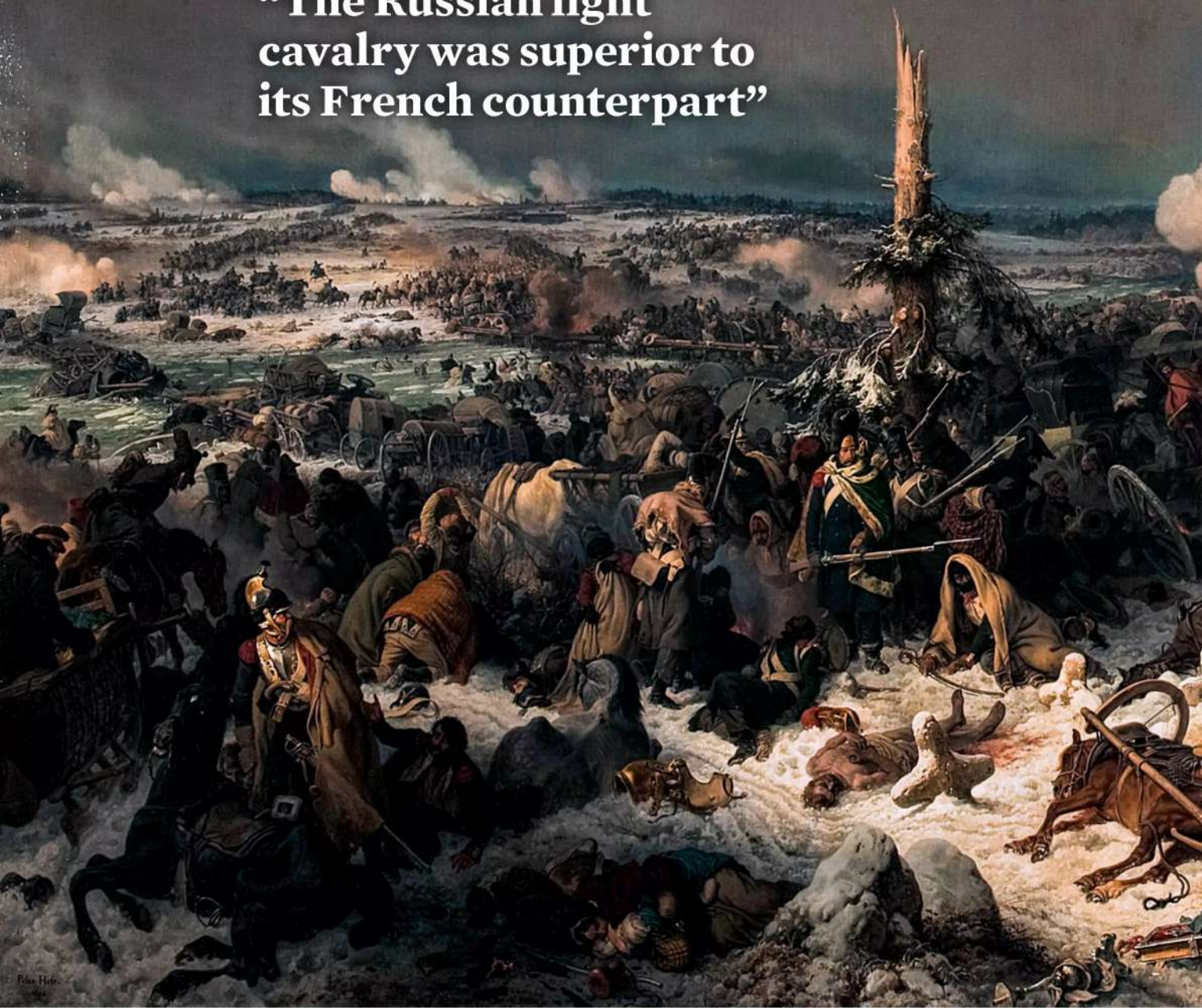
It was slow-going. The remaining horses were weak and the wagons with looted goods slowed the retreat further. The Russian light cavalry was superior and prevented any foraging. Napoleon failed to install any system for distributing food and feed. Discipline collapsed. Some ate at the expense of others; the unlucky ones succumbed to starvation or were killed by Cossacks, who snapped up all stragglers. Cossack General Platov reported that the enemy were abandoning luggage, along with the ►

**Napoleon looks out over a burning Moscow. Painting by Adam Albrecht.**

**“The farmers’ wives also took part in the ambushes and fighting”**



### “The Russian light cavalry was superior to its French counterpart”



- sick and wounded and that he encountered more dead and dying with every step he took.

Kutuzov followed a parallel course a few days' march further south. Besides a failed attempt to cut off the rear, there were no major encounters.

On 6th November, it froze. Winter had arrived. During his long stay in Moscow, Napoleon had done nothing to provide winter clothing for his men. Neither he, nor most of the soldiers in the Grande

Armée, understood how to protect themselves from the cold.

The Grim Reaper became even busier. In his memoirs, Lieutenant Lignières recalled how often in the mornings they would get up in order to move out, but “many would remain seated; we would shake them to wake them up, thinking they were asleep; they were dead”. The already half-dead horses also fell. Most of the cavalry and artillery were





lost, and with them much of the army's potency. The lack of horses meant that a large part of the wagons had to be left, even though they were full of supplies and looted goods. A few days later, the first troops stumbled into Smolensk. The desperate and starving soldiers looted and devoured food that could have sustained the army for a week, in a single, mass orgy of eating. This shattered Napoleon's plans to winter there. Although, in truth, it was

no longer a realistic proposition for the French to hold Smolensk. Napoleon only had around 40,000 men left. Kutuzov now had a far larger army and was dangerously close to the south, and marching from the north was an army under General Peter Wittgenstein. The retreat had to continue.

**KUTUZOV MIGHT HAVE** dealt the French a decisive blow, but chose to stay his hand – much ►

**Napoleon crosses Berezina. Painting by Peter von Hess.**



# NAPOLEON IN RUSSIA

► to the anger of both Alexander and his own officers. He saw no reason to risk his soldiers, who largely consisted of recruits and untrained militiamen, in a battle against the foremost tactician of the period when cold, hunger and partisans were doing such an effective job.

Instead, Kutuzov protected his men, who were also beginning to suffer. The farther they marched from their bases, the fewer supplies they had. They too were hungry and they too froze.

However, a seemingly isolated French army corps at Krasnoi (now Krasny) 50 kilometres south-west of Smolensk proved too great a temptation for Kutuzov, who soon found himself embroiled in a clash with the entire Grande Armée, just the type of battle he had been trying to avoid. The fighting raged for three days, during which the French continued to retreat west along the road. The Battle of Krasnoi ended in a fantastic victory for Kutuzov, who captured 200 cannon and more than 20,000 prisoners of war.

After that, Kutuzov stepped on the brake. His army was in bad shape, and active winter operations would cost many lives. Instead, he left the final defeat of the Grande Armée to Wittgenstein and



The wily veteran general Kutuzov protected his men.

Chichagov, now advancing from the north and south.

**THE GRANDE ARMÉE** soon reached the River Berezina, which was still flowing. The bridges were gone and Chichagov's army was on the far bank, Wittgenstein's was approaching from the north and Kutuzov's troops were just a few days' march behind. The Grande Armée was cut off and surrounded, but Napoleon was not beaten.

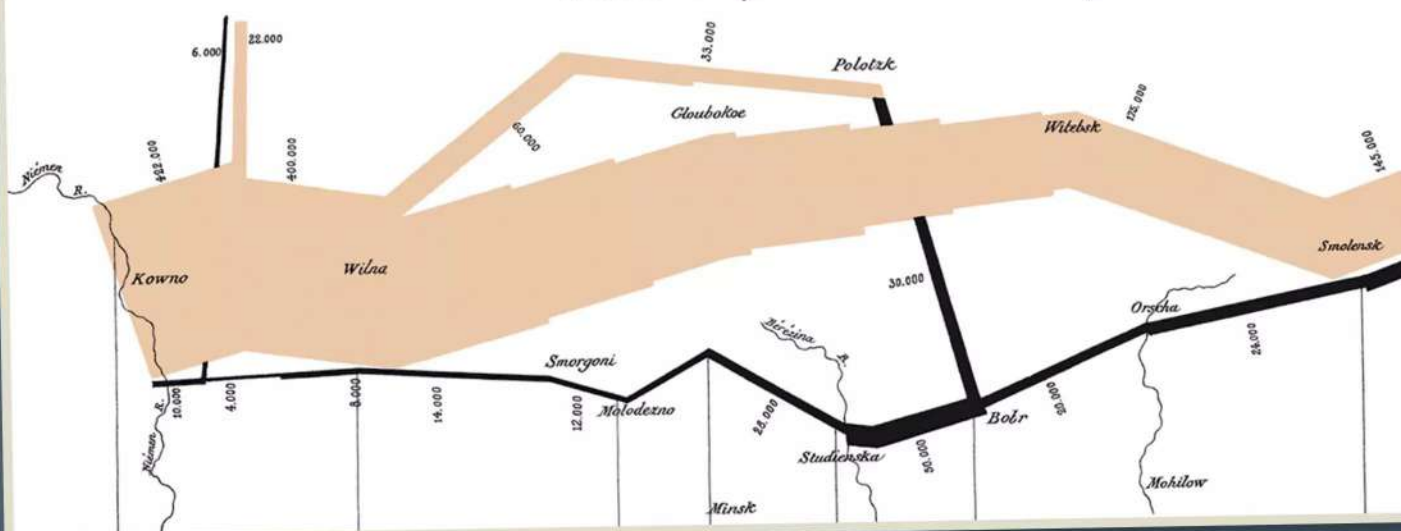
Using a feint, he tricked Chichagov into moving south. The French engineers took advantage and quickly built two bridges. At noon on 26th November, the first bridge was ready. The second was completed a few hours later. Chaos reigned during the crossing, many fell and drowned amid the crush and panic. But the crossing was made and by the evening of the 27th, only the rearguard and a mass of stragglers remained on the eastern shore.

Early the next morning, the Russians hit them again. It was a day too late. Napoleon and his men fought like furies. On the western shore, Chichagov's attack faltered, while on the eastern shore, Wittgenstein's arriving army attempted to crush the rearguard protecting the bridge, but without success. The fighting petered out in the evening. During the night, the last units crept across the river. 25,000 corpses and prisoners of war were left behind, but the Grande Armée had escaped.

That night a storm blew up. The thermometer dropped to minus 30 degrees. The escape became

## “The next morning, the Russians hit them again”

Les nombres d'hommes présents sont représentés par les largeurs des zones colorées à raison d'un millimètre pour dix mille hommes; ils sont en zones. Le rouge désigne les hommes qui entrent en Russie; le noir ceux qui en sortent. — Les renseignements qui ont servi à dresser les ouvrages de M. M. Thiers, de Ségur, de Fozensac, de Chambray et le journal inédit de Jacob, pharmacien de l'armée. Pour mieux faire juger à l'œil la diminution de l'armée, j'ai supposé que les corps du Prince Jérôme et du Maréchal Davoust qui avaient été à Mohilow et ont rejoint vers Orscha et Witebsk, avaient toujours marché avec l'armée.







a death march. Wounded and sick were left to die. People were murdered for a coat or a scrap of meat.

When the storm subsided after two days, there were only 10,000 men left in the French army. The only reason the Russians didn't eliminate them straight away was because they too were completely exhausted. After breaking out from Tarutino, Kutuzov's army had shrunk from 97,000 to 27,000. More than 40,000 men were being treated in field hospitals. The situation was not much better for Chichagov's and Wittgenstein's forces. Then a typhoid epidemic broke out.

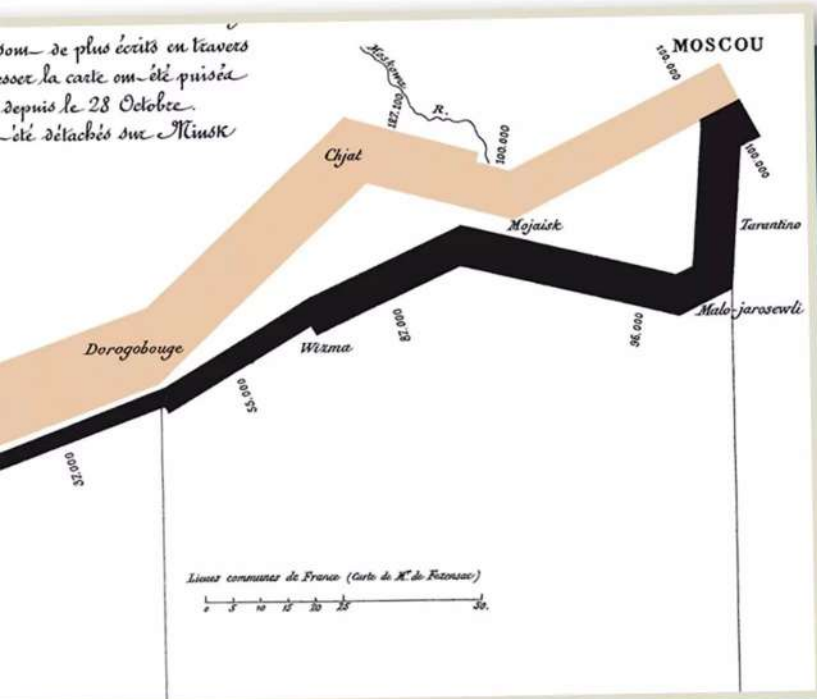
At the beginning of December, Napoleon assembled his marshals to announce that he

would go to Paris to strengthen the home front and mobilise a new army. As the emperor rushed home, the remnants of the army dragged itself to Vilnius in Arctic conditions. They left behind a trail of dead people.

"We walked through this empire of death like miserable shadows!", French General Philippe-Paul, comte de Ségur wrote. "The dull and monotonous sound of our steps, the crunch of the snow and the feeble groans of the dying were the only sounds that disturbed that vast and mournful taciturnity."

Vilnius was full of supplies, uniforms and weapons, but panic prevailed and the headlong flight continued towards the River Neman. ►

**The French army in retreat at Vilnius.**



## Only a tiny fraction survived

★ No illustration of the invasion of Russia is more striking than French engineer Charles Joseph Minard's graph that details the losses of the Grande Armée (see illustration).

In a simple flow chart, Minard captures the army's strength over time, their marching distance and direction, as well as the temperature on certain days. The thick brown band shows how strong the Grande Armée was when it crossed the River Neman and how it shrank as it moved east.

The retreat is marked in black. According to his calculations, the French main force crossed the River Neman with 422,000 soldiers in June 1812, but barely six months later only 10,000 of them survived to make the return crossing.



# NAPOLEON IN RUSSIA

- ▶ Cossacks snapped at their heels and killed anyone unfortunate enough to fall behind.

The fleeing remnants of the Grande Armée swarmed across the Neman at Kaunas, while a small rearguard under Marshal Michel Ney kept the Russian cavalry at bay. Finally, the marshal fell back and crossed the bridge with a handful of men.

On the far side, on Polish soil, Ney stopped and fired a final, defiant musket shot at the pursuing Russians. Napoleon's invasion of Russia was over.

**THE PRICE THAT** the Grande Armée and its civilian auxiliaries paid for Napoleon's ambitions was staggering. Of the almost 600,000 soldiers who set foot in Russia during the campaign, around 400,000 died. Added to this were tens of thousands of civilians and more than 150,000 horses. The units that had fought on the northern and southern fronts of the Grande Armée – mostly Prussians and Austrians – got off quite lightly. The main force that accompanied Napoleon from the Neman to Moscow and back again was more or less destroyed.

A few days before they crossed the River Neman in the summer of 1812, the Grande Armées' 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Army Corps mustered a total of 107,097 soldiers. By 1st February, 1813, just 6,436 were left. Six entire infantry regiments from the Old Guard were wiped out. Several cavalry regiments were also gone, while others consisted of only a few officers. Of the 918 men in 5th Cuirassier Regiment, just eight lined up for roll call in early 1813.

The victors lost almost as many. More than 200,000 Russian soldiers died during the campaign,

although some estimates believe the true figure was almost double that number. Added to this were all the Russian, Polish and Prussian civilians killed by hunger, cold and sickness in the areas through which the armies advanced. The war between France's emperor and Russia's tsar may have cost as many as one million lives in total.

**THE OUTCOME OF** the campaign appears astonishing. How could the foremost field commander of the day, at the head of the largest army Europe had ever seen, suffer such a catastrophic defeat against an enemy that, when the campaign started, had half the number of soldiers? Napoleon and his apologists blamed the Russian winter.

But winter only really struck in December – which, unlike November, was much colder than normal in 1812. By then the war was long lost and a large part of the Grande Armée had already been destroyed. In fact, a number of other factors helped determine the outcome of the campaign. Napoleon's plan had been to attack in his usual style, counting on superior mobility and combined assaults to force a situation where his own tactical genius, coupled with a numerical superiority and better trained soldiers could bring about a decisive victory. Aside from the odd awkward encounter in Egypt, such tactics had always brought him victory, ever since his first campaign in Italy in 1796-97. But in the end, Napoleon's enemies figured out the secret of his success.

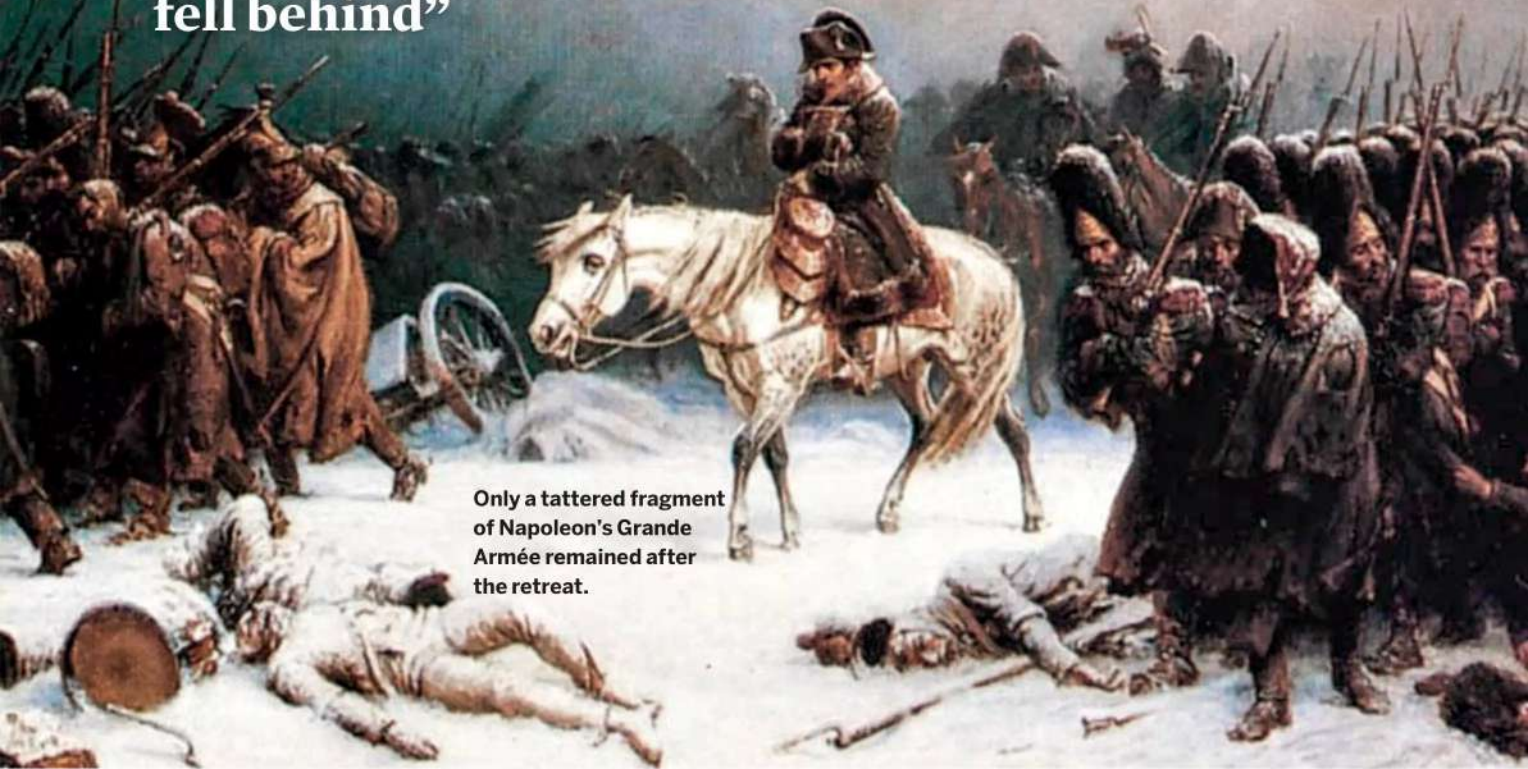
As early as 1807, Barclay de Tolly began making plans to neutralise the emperor's tactics with a

**Marshal Ney held off the Russian cavalry, while the rest of the French army crossed the River Neman.**





## “Cossacks snapped at their heels and killed anyone who fell behind”



Only a tattered fragment of Napoleon's Grande Armée remained after the retreat.

Fabian strategy, plans that came to fruition in 1812. The strategy took advantage of the fact that Russia was a large, thinly populated country where it was difficult to supply large armies, and that the Russian light cavalry was superior to its French counterpart. It was only after the Grande Armée had been worn down by long marches and supply problems that the Russian forces risked meeting it on the battlefield.

The plan was neither subtle nor original, yet Napoleon failed to recognise the threat. “Through what form of blindness had he [Napoleon] failed to spot a trap which was visible to the whole world?” Kutuzov asked acidly after the campaign.

The question cannot be answered, but it is clear that Napoleon's actions before and during the war were based on boldness and wishful thinking rather than any clear-sighted analysis. It was as though he had fallen prey to his own propaganda, becoming convinced of his own invincibility.

He made a host of mistakes, all of which helped advance the Russian strategy: he underestimated the supply difficulties; he stubbornly resisted any interruption during advances; he dallied in Moscow in the hope of negotiating a peace, despite having a weak bargaining position; he was dismissive about the cruel conditions of a Russian winter; he allowed himself to be drawn into a time-consuming

offensive south-west of Moscow; and he failed to properly organise the retreat.

**IT COULD HAVE** gone differently, despite all these misjudgements. The Russians gave Napoleon two opportunities to decide the war, at Smolensk and at Borodino. But he was afraid that arranging a manoeuvre against the enemy's flank and rear would give his opponent time to fall back. Consequently, he chose to go for a frontal attack instead.

The battles were empty, tactical victories. Napoleon's Russian campaign was finished: there was no crushing victory on the battlefield – his force was simply eroded by Alexander's, Barclay de Tolly's and Kutuzov's fabulous strategy. Ever the gambler, Napoleon staked everything on a successful invasion of Russia, but he made mistake after mistake, and when it was all over, he had lost everything to a more capable opponent. ★

**Magnus Olofsson** is a historian.

**Further Reading:** *Russia against Napoleon. The Battle for Europe, 1807-1814* (2016) by Dominic Lieven ★ *1812: Napoleon's Fatal March on Moscow* (2005) by Adam Zamoyski ★ *The Diary of a Napoleonic Foot Soldier* (1991) by Jakob Walter



# THE TRUTH ABOUT **BALACLAVA**

The Battle of Balaclava on 25th October, 1854, is best known for the suicidal charge of the British Light Brigade between Russian artillery batteries. But in fact, another of the day's encounters had a greater influence in deciding the outcome of the battle and, ultimately, the entire Crimean War.

Text: **JOHAN LUPANDER**

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"The Valley of Death" outside Balaclava was filled with cannonballs following the Light Brigade's catastrophic charge against massed Russian artillery on 25th October, 1854.  
Photo by Roger Fenton.



**T**he Crimean War, which ran from 1853 to 1856, put an end to the 40 years of peace between Europe's great powers that had followed the Napoleonic Wars. On one side stood Russia and on the other an alliance that included Britain, France, the Ottoman Turks and Sardinia. Most of the war took place on the Crimean Peninsula, which is surrounded on three sides by the Black Sea – although there were also battles in the seas around Finland (which was a Grand Duchy and autonomous part of Imperial Russia at the time, with Tsar Nicholas I as its duke).

The war started because of the Russian tsar's ambition to expand his empire south towards the Black Sea in the hope of gaining a warm-water port on the Mediterranean. In the summer of 1853, Russian forces invaded and occupied territories in present-day Romania, which at that time were

under the protection of the Ottoman Turks. As a result, in October, the Turks declared war on Russia.

**FOLLOWING THE RUSSIAN** victory in the naval battle at Sinope in November of that year, Britain and France, fearing that the war would end with Russia in control of the Black Sea region, decided to enter the conflict – first with naval support and then with a land-based expeditionary force. After much ado, the combined British-French forces and their Turkish allies landed troops on the Crimean Peninsula in September 1854. Their goal was to capture the lightly fortified Russian military base at Sevastopol and crush the Russian Black Sea Fleet. Before the month was over, the Allied force had the base surrounded.

The Allies, who now set about besieging the base, were entirely dependent on supplies unloaded at the small port of Balaclava (now Balaklava) on the south ▶

### Fake news? Fenton's photo

Roger Fenton's photo entitled Valley of the Shadow of Death is one of history's first war photos. But the work's accuracy has been questioned. Two examples of the picture exist: one where the cannonballs lie together in the ditch and a second where they are scattered all along the road. Did Fenton move the spent ammunition to improve the photo or is there some other explanation?



## BALACLAVA 1854

► coast of the peninsula. Four kilometres to the north lay a ridge known as Causeway Heights. Strategically speaking, this position was key to securing military control in the region. It was defended by Turkish troops in redoubts. Royal Marines, supported by five artillery batteries, had been given responsibility for the defensive position closest to Balaclava, to protect the port, ramparts, supplies and military hospital. On their left there was a 1.5-kilometre gap in the defences stretching to Kadikoi Hill, where infantry and light artillery were grouped. The road west to Sevastopol crossed another ridge, the Sapoune Heights, which was held by relatively strong French and British units.

**EARLY ON 25TH** October, the Russian commander assembled his troops – 25,000 men and 78 guns – to attack the Allied forces – 28,000 men and 41 guns – from the east. The intention was to take Balaclava along with its port and thereby cut the Allies' supply lines. This would save the Russians from making a difficult frontal attack on the Sapoune Heights.

A first step towards capturing Balaclava was to take the Causeway Heights and use them as a base for continued attacks, particularly against the Allied units on the Sapoune Heights. Four separate actions were fought during the morning.

The first was a Russian attack with infantry and artillery against the Turkish-held redoubts on the Causeway Heights. After initially meeting

## “The British Heavy Calvary thundered towards the immobile Russians, who gave way and fled the field”

stiff resistance, the Russian forces managed to dislodge the Turks and capture the fortified emplacements within two hours.

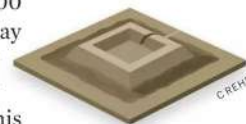
**THE SECOND ACTION** was launched once the redoubts were captured, when the Russian cavalry was ordered to attack Balaclava itself. The cavalry formed up just south of the Causeway Heights, below redoubts four and five, but soon found themselves exposed to artillery fire from the Kadikoi Hill south-west of their position.

To remove the threat to the cavalry's flank, four squadrons of horse – a total of around 400 cavalymen – were sent to take the hill, which lay halfway between Balaclava and the Causeway Heights. The rest of the Russian cavalry – barely 2,000 men – waited to begin their advance once this obstacle had been captured.

Among the defenders on the ridge were 550 men from the 93rd (Sutherland Highlanders) Regiment of Foot and a Royal Artillery field battery. Major General Sir Colin Campbell, commander of the



Tsar Nicholas I.



A redoubt is a defensive work with an earth wall around a central ditch.

## The battle's four phases





Highland Brigade, had joined the 93rd on the hill that morning to direct the defence.

The fighting began with Russian artillery supporting the four cavalry squadrons advancing up the ridge. The 93rd Highlanders took cover from the cannonade by lying on their bellies on the rearward slope. When the Russian cavalry finally came within firing range, the Scots returned to their positions and started to subject the approaching horsemen to volley fire. After three salvoes, the Russian cavalymen broke off their advance, wheeled left and returned in good order to rejoin the main cavalry force, which was still waiting on the valley floor below the Causeway Heights.

As will become clear, this simple, but dramatic engagement came to play a crucial part in the battle.

**THE THIRD ENGAGEMENT** of the day started with the Russian cavalry, now back together after the aborted assault on the Kadikoi Hill, advancing south. The British Heavy Cavalry Brigade had been ordered to advance to reinforce the defence of Balacava, but were still moving into position when they encountered the Russian horsemen. Although outnumbered almost 3-1, the British Heavies formed up and prepared to attack the enemy's horse. The trumpet major sounded the charge and the British Heavy Cavalry thundered towards the immobile Russians, who gave way and fled the field. 700 British cavalry had managed

to sweep away almost 2,000 of their Russian counterparts

**THE FOURTH AND** final encounter on this historic day was the Light Brigade's fabled charge a few hours later. Led by its softly spoken and controversial commander, Lord Cardigan, the brigade launched its attack up the length of a valley that was lined on both sides with Russian artillery and infantry divisions. At the end of the valley, more enemy cannons waited and, behind them, more Russian cavalry.

In a tragic blunder that included ambiguous, contradictory orders, arrogant gestures and a high degree of incompetence, the Light Brigade's 676 riders advanced towards a literal dead end. In fact, the British commander, General Lord Raglan, had intended that the Light Brigade ride up to the redoubts on the Causeway Heights to chase off Russians who were attempting to carry away captured British artillery pieces, but his orders were misinterpreted with calamitous consequences.

Against the odds, the brigade not only managed to reach the cannon at the end of the valley, but it also drove away the Russian cavalry waiting behind the emplacements before returning to its own lines. Just over half of the brigade was dead or wounded – a large, but by no means outstanding, loss.

The Light Brigade was, nevertheless, finished as a combat unit, despite the fact that its accomplishments ►

## ★ FACTS

### The Battle of Balacava

25th October, 1854

#### Result:

British and French retained control over key areas.

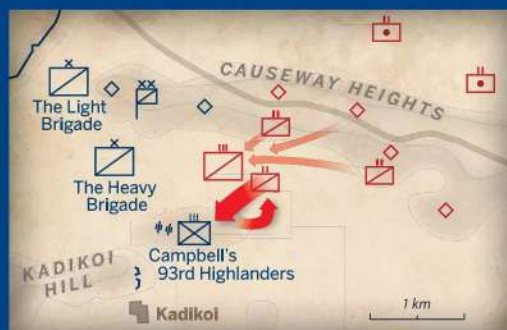
#### Combatants

##### (Senior commander):

 Great Britain (Lord Raglan)  
 Ottoman Turks  
 France (F C de Canrobert)  
 Russia (Pavel Liprandi)

#### Strength:

    
 4,500  
 26 cannons  
  
 25,000  
 78 cannons



**Second meeting** After capturing the Causeway Heights, Russian forces gather for an attack south, but a 400-strong detachment advances first on the Kadikoi Hill to clear flanking fire coming from its summit. The 93rd Highlanders stands its ground, and the Russians wheel away.



**Third meeting** Russian cavalymen gather before their attack south towards Balacava, but they are surprised by the British Heavy Brigade who charge and scatter them.



#### Fourth meeting

The Light Brigade's famous, but less significant, charge into the "Valley of Death", north of the Causeway Heights.

Russian field cannon on the Causeway Heights. Re-enactment from 2003.





## BALACLAVA 1854

- far outweighed its losses. On the other hand, the British had shown a fighting spirit that day that could not help but make an impression on the Russians, thus giving them an edge in terms of morale.

The Battle of Balaclava petered out. The Russians now occupied the Causeway Heights but were unable to use them to threaten Balaclava. Their position on the ridge did enable them to observe and disrupt the transport of supplies from the port, but the autumn and winter weather prevented them undertaking any major operations.

Paradoxically, it is the least significant engagement of the battle – the charge of the Light Brigade – that is best remembered today. At the start of the day, the Allies' supply line was in danger of being cut, but this threat had been eliminated by the end of the battle.

Which engagement was most important in securing such an outcome for the Allies?

**FOLLOWING THE CAPTURE** of the Causeway Heights, the Russians launched only two more offensive actions that day: first, the aborted advance of four squadrons up the hill held by the 93rd Highlanders and, second, the cavalry's attempted advance towards Balaclava less than an hour later. If the first attack had succeeded, the advance on Balaclava would have started earlier. Thus, the British Heavy brigade may not have been in place

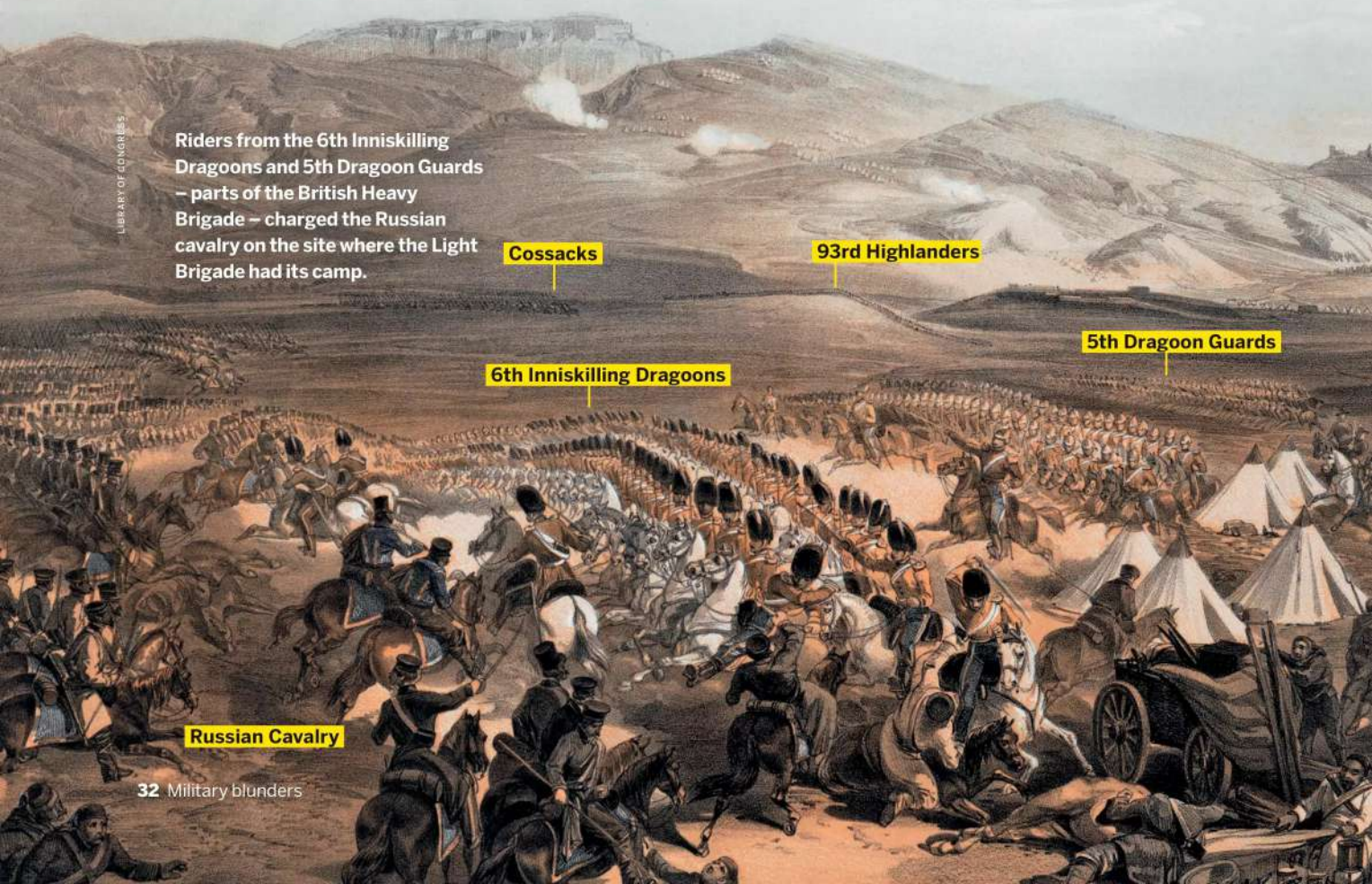
to charge the Russian cavalry, which then gave up the idea of capturing Balaclava's port. The defence of the Kadikoi Hill and the charge that stopped the Russian cavalry advance were therefore the day's critical battles. When the four engagements are reviewed according to their strategic significance, the influential role that the 93rd Highlanders played becomes clear. In fact, it was the Highlanders who decided the Battle of Balaclava.

Although later overshadowed by the Light Brigade's charge, the 93rd's skirmish received plenty of attention at the time thanks to war correspondent Sir William Howard Russell. The famous phrase the 'thin red line' was an oft repeated misquotation from his report in *The Times* on 14th November, 1854: "That thin red streak tipped with a line of steel".

Russell was on the heights that day and witnessed the "thin red streak" of the 93rd Highlanders first-hand. Despite its vulnerable position in the face of cavalry, the regiment did not attempt to protect itself by forming square, as military rules of the day dictated. Russell was deeply impressed by the calm discipline shown by the Scots, horrified by the limited effect of their first rifle volley, and relieved when the Russians turned to leave after taking a third salvo, just moments before the Scots would have been cut down and trampled where they stood. In a well-known, but inaccurate painting of the



The Minié rifle's bullets were significantly more accurate than the round bullets in a classic musket.





# Scots closed their eyes as they fired

Why were the 93rd Highlanders' volleys so surprisingly ineffective during the Battle of Balaclava? There were three coinciding factors.

**1** After months in the field, the Minié rifles' targeting sights became rather fragile, which has led to speculation that some of the sights were broken on the Scottish regiment's rifles.

**2** There were certain weaknesses in the Minié's expanding-bullet principle that revealed themselves when soldiers tried loading them while lying on their backs. With the weapon almost horizontal, the gunpowder poured into the barrel wasn't distributed evenly at the end of the barrel. Similarly, the bullet might not be correctly positioned. It could also be squashed if a soldier

was heavy handed with the ramrod. Anything like that – mistakes made in the heat of battle – could affect the bullet's speed, direction and stability.

**3** The guns of the period had a powerful recoil that made the soldiers close their eyes before firing. To avoid such a kick, some soldiers put less charge in the barrel, which also affected performance.

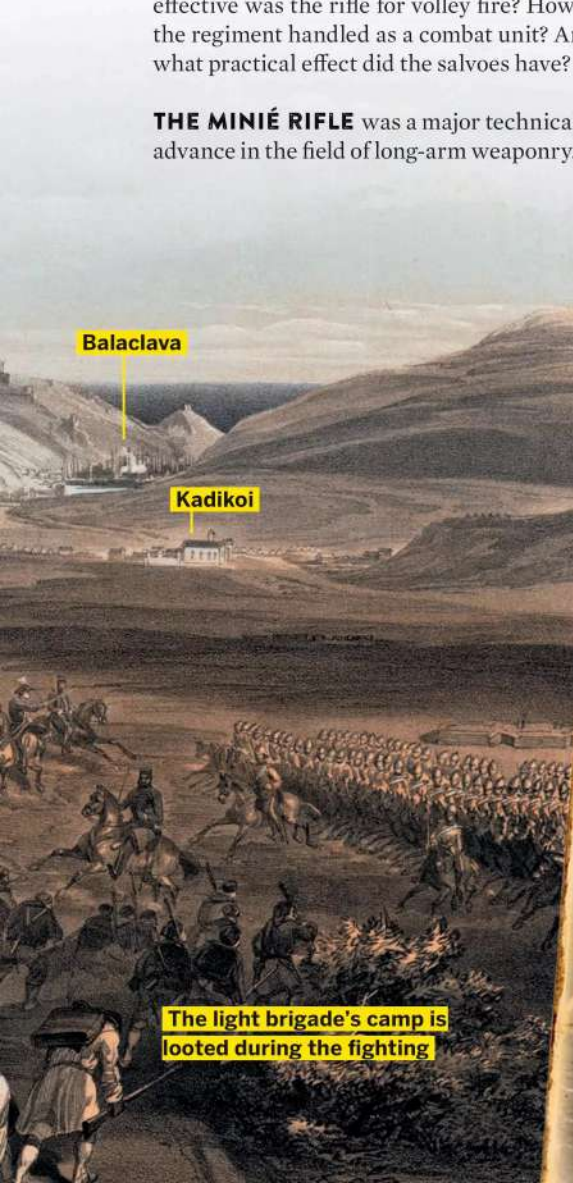
battle, the Russian cavalry is shown falling at the feet of the proud Highland infantrymen (see the image on page 34).

Other reports and other depictions of the fight have been similarly exaggerated. Examining how a light infantry regiment like the 93rd was able to turn back a Russian cavalry advance using just P1851 Minié rifles – the most modern muzzle-loading rifles of their day – raises three questions: how technically effective was the rifle for volley fire? How was the regiment handled as a combat unit? And what practical effect did the salvos have?

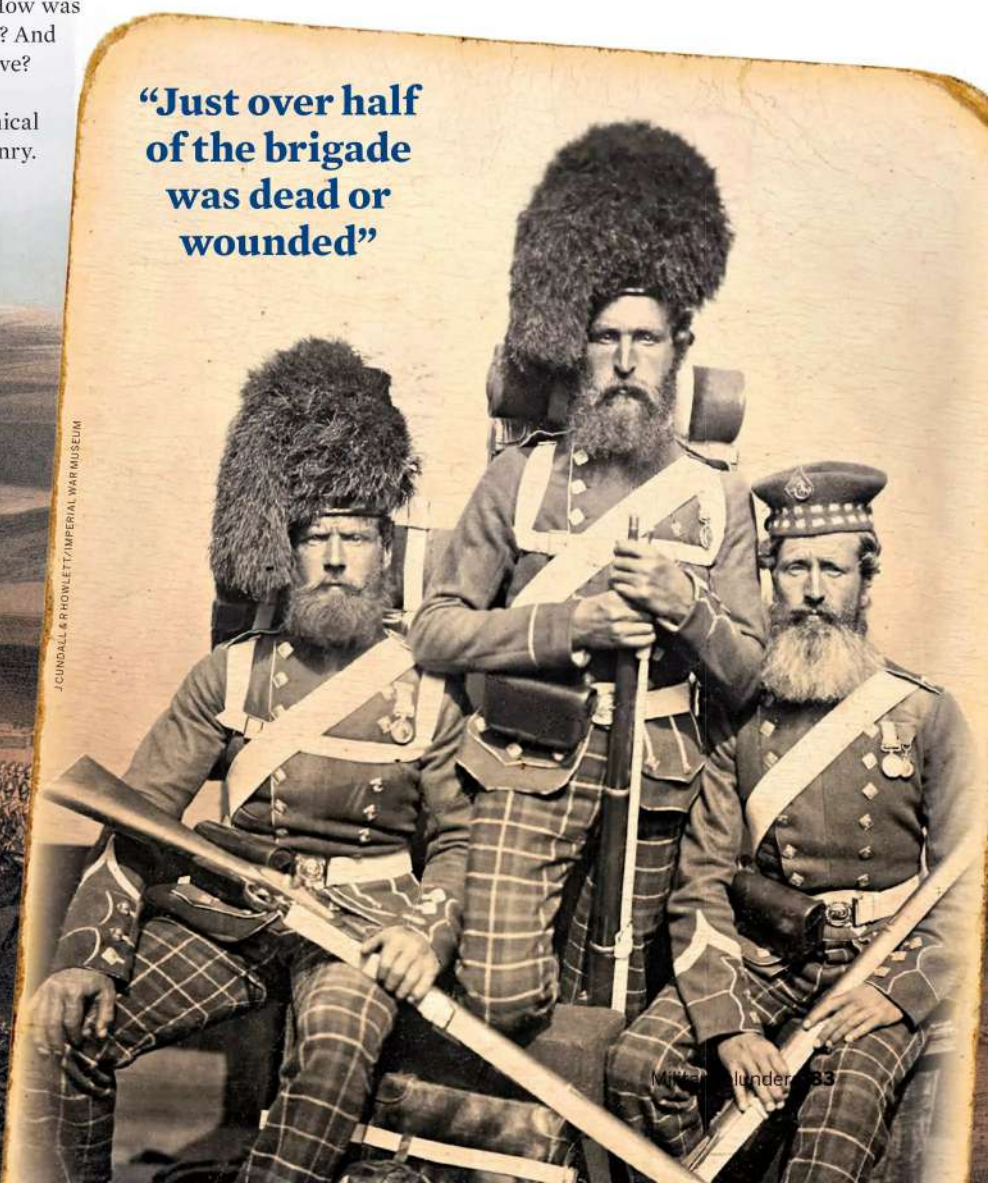
**THE MINIÉ RIFLE** was a major technical advance in the field of long-arm weaponry.

The conical-cylindrical-shaped bullet was easy to load and had a concave recess at the bottom that caused the projectile to expand when fired. This meant that while new bullets could slide down the barrel – even when it was caked with gunpowder deposits – once fired, the grooves in the bullet's sides would slot neatly into the barrel's rifling. As a result, the spinning bullet had a higher output velocity and greater directional stability than a ▶

**Below: Scottish infantrymen from the 72nd Highlanders, who fought in the Crimea with Minié rifles.**



**“Just over half of the brigade was dead or wounded”**



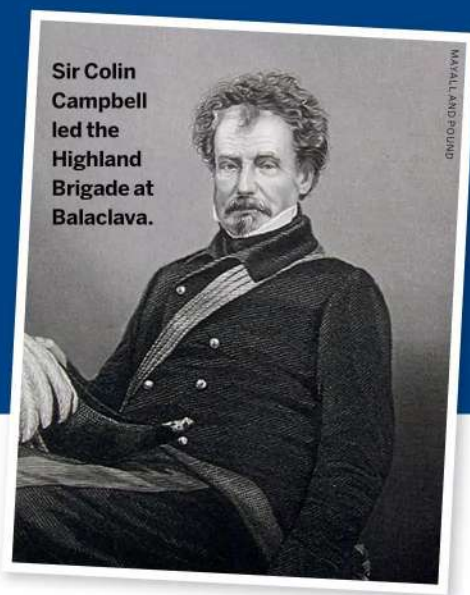


## Campbell commanded India

★ Colin Campbell was born in 1792. He participated in Wellington's Peninsula campaign in Spain and later served in the colonies. In 1853, he retired. When the Crimean War broke out one year

later, Campbell returned to service at the age of 62. Later he commanded one of the two army corps left in the Crimea. Then, in 1857, he became commander-in-chief of India. Campbell rounded

off his career by being appointed Baron Clyde, of Clydesdale in Scotland, and finally Field Marshal, shortly before his death in 1863. He was buried at Westminster Abbey.



Sir Colin Campbell led the Highland Brigade at Balaclava.

MATTHEW ANDERSON

► musket ball. Together, these factors gave the Minié rifle a greater range and accuracy as well as faster reload rate compared to both classic muskets and the ribbed, round-ball rifle, which was difficult to charge. During practice, a target that was similar in size to the front of a horse and rider could be hit 40 percent of the time at a range of 500 metres. That's highly accurate compared to an 1842-model smooth-bore musket, which hit very little beyond a 200-metre range.

On this basis, Campbell probably expected reasonably good results with the first salvo, when the Russian cavalry was 450–700 metres away. The question was whether this would be the case in live combat conditions.

The British infantry's well-practised combat procedures were enshrined in regulations that had been followed for centuries. One rule was that infantry units facing a cavalry attack must form square. In this formation, the soldiers lined up in a square or rectangle. Each side was four-men deep, while its length depended on the number of soldiers in the unit. The front two rows knelt down with their bayonet-tipped muskets pointing upwards, with the butt hard against the ground. The two rows behind stood with their weapons at the ready. Once in a square formation, soldiers were less vulnerable, as cavalry horses were reluctant to charge the wall of bayonets. The square also allowed the unit to fire in four different directions. The problem was that

the volleys fired were limited compared to those from a line formation, but that was the price for the extra protection the square afforded.

Campbell chose to prioritise offensive power over safety by keeping the 93rd in line. Although he was not the commander of the regiment, he had it under full control. The soldiers manoeuvred in an orderly way when told to retreat behind the brow of the hill to escape the Russian cannonade and came smartly back up the ridge and waited in a line formation until ordered to fire.

**THE THIRD QUESTION** – what practical effect did the salvos have? – can be answered quite briefly: very little. It's possible that the first salvo was fired by the demoralised Turkish units while the cavalry was still 700 metres away. This volley had no effect and probably only served to convince the Russians that resistance on the hill was weak. The cavalry continued its advance unimpeded and at good speed. The Turks fled.

On advancing towards the Kadikoi Hill, the Russian cavalry probably expected to find a small artillery battery there, one that it could easily knock out. Instead it was surprised when, at around 450 metres from the top, it suddenly saw a red line of enemy infantry crowning the ridge, followed by blossoming flames as it fired its second volley. The

**The 93rd Highlanders stood resolutely as the Russian cavalry advanced at Balaclava. This heroic, if not entirely accurate, image was painted in 1881.**





Russian commander may have interpreted this shot, made far outside normal musket range, as the work of inexperienced troops who had fired too soon. The fact that this salvo also caused no significant damage would certainly have contributed to the Russians continuing their advance.

For almost a minute after the unit's second volley, gunpowder smoke lingered in the air, making it impossible for the two sides to see one another. The Russian cavalry continued its advance, and the 93rd Highlanders reloaded their weapons – something they did while lying on their backs to avoid presenting a target to the enemy's gunners. The Scots next caught sight of the cavalry when they were just 150 metres from them. Seemingly unaffected by the volleys fired from the British Army's best rifle, they moved relentlessly forward and were now just 20 seconds away from smashing the thin red line of Highlanders. The target of the cavalry attack – the artillery battery – had fired everything it had and the gunners were now preparing to spike the guns. Everything depended on the Scots.

For the first time, the commander of the Russian cavalry squadrons could clearly discern the red line on the ridge in front of them. The realisation that an entire infantry regiment was still ranged against them must have hit them at the same time as the 93rd's third Minié rifle volley, this time fired from a distance where one could reasonably expect the full, lethal effect of the weapons to be unleashed.

**NOW, THE NERVES** of the attacking soldiers would be put to the test. A significant part of the advancing Russian cavalry consisted of Don Cossacks – good riders, but a little skittish in a melee if the odds were anything but highly favourable. This is probably why the Russian commander decided to give up the advance and return to the main cavalry force. The manoeuvre was carried out in an orderly manner, partly veiled by the lingering gunpowder smoke of the last salvo, and all without breaking formation. This despite the fact that the cavalry was taking close-range fire in their flank from the Highlanders who had continued shooting.

Based on contemporary depictions, Russian losses seem to have been small, despite the Scots' volley fire. Contemporary sources say nothing about a Russian unit in disarray or a battlefield littered with fallen Russian riders and horses.

The 93rd Highlanders had undeniably repulsed the Russian cavalry attack – and without losing a single man. However, this wasn't due to their firepower, but rather the impression the Scottish infantry line made on the Russian squadron's commander. In short, the battle's events were inconsequential – the Russian cavalry assumed it was advancing against weak opposition, but retreated once it realised the

## **“They were now just 20 seconds away from smashing the thin red line”**

true strength of the enemy. The defending infantry regiment suffered no losses, despite its commander overestimating his own firepower and taking an astonishing risk by not forming square. The 93rd Highlanders accomplished its task honourably, but its fêted glory in the contemporary press and the annals of history seems, on closer inspection, overstated.

Campbell showed outstanding leadership and compared to most other British commanders, he showed surprising flexibility that allowed him to quickly alter his tactics and break with practiced systems. This was especially impressive given his advanced age. He was also lucky. He wasn't penalised for his overestimation of the 93rd's accuracy and rate of fire. Also, the Scots' line wasn't really suited to close combat. A Russian cavalry charge immediately after their second salvo would have prevented any further volleys from the defenders. In which case, the battle may have turned out quite differently.

The story of 93rd's defence of the Kadikoi Hill raises questions about how credible depictions of battlefield events are, how they are perpetuated and how frequently myths come to overshadow the truth. It's also worth recalling the political need for identifiable heroes after questionable wars, not to mention writers' requirements for subjects. The British blundered many times during the Crimean War and creditable actions were no doubt exaggerated as a result.

**THE ALLIED SIEGE** of Sevastopol continued until the Russians evacuated the base in September 1855. Then the British began the destruction of military installations in the city. A peace accord – the Paris Treaty – was signed in March 1856, but it was short-lived: Russian ambitions in the region remained and it clashed again with the Ottoman Turks in 1877–78.

In hindsight, the Crimean War achieved little while the cost in human lives was high. According to available statistics – which must be treated cautiously – around 615,000 died in the war. Only 20 percent of those deaths occurred during combat. More conservative estimates – which are probably more reliable – put Allied deaths at 165,000. Of those, around 70 percent were caused by disease and an ignorance of basic hygiene principles. ★

**Johan Lupander** is a writer of military history.



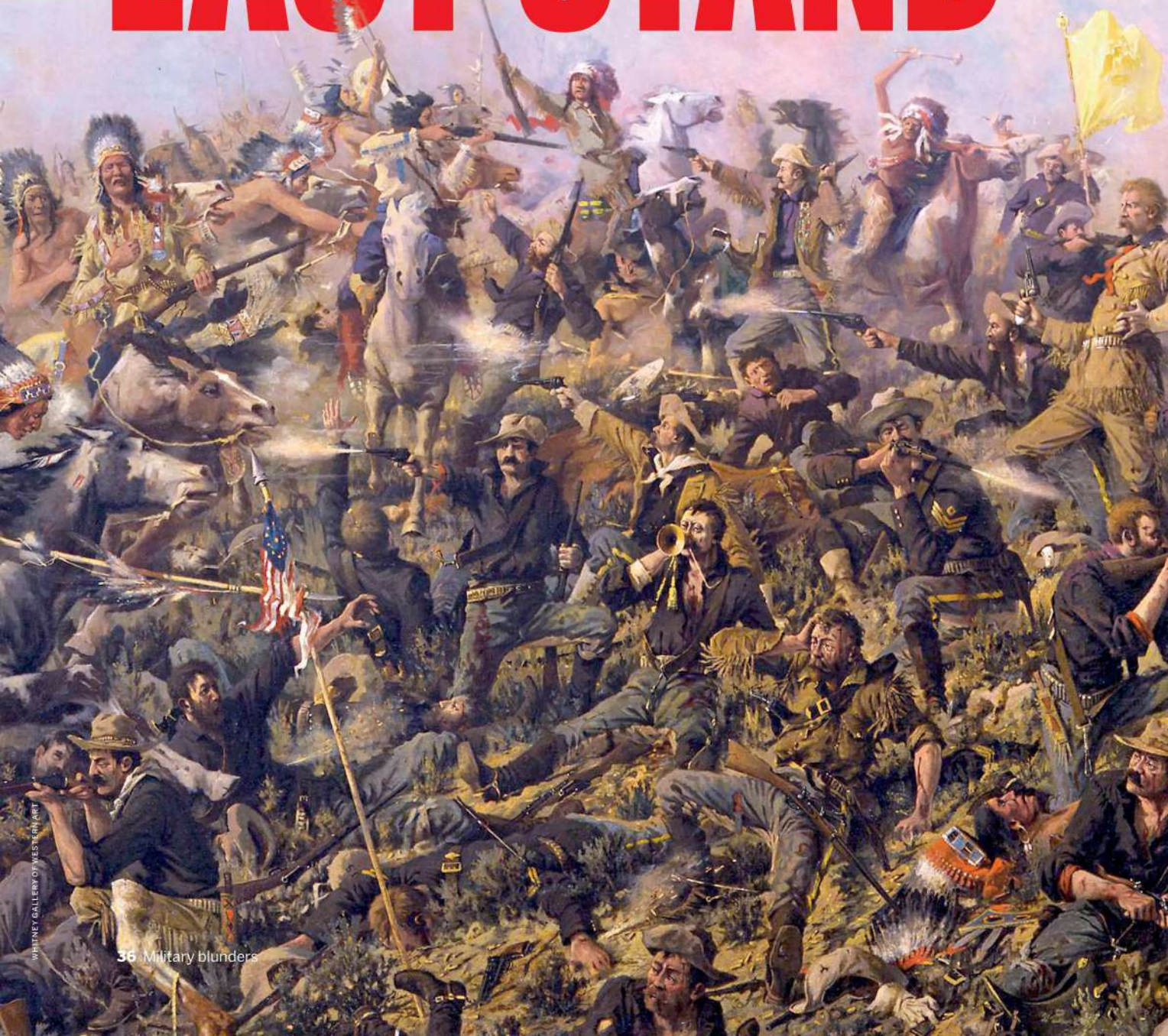
ROGER FENTON/LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

**William Howard Russell, the war correspondent who inspired the term ‘the thin red line’.**



Battle of the Little Bighorn, 1876

# CUSTER'S LAST STAND





By the end of the 19th century, most Plains Indians had been defeated, ejected from their prairies and forced to live in reservations. But on 25th June, 1876 beside the Little Bighorn River, 4,000 Indians crushed an arrogant and rash lieutenant colonel and the cavalry regiment he was leading.

Text: SØREN AAGAARD

**N**ot far from the town of Bismarck in the US prairie state of North Dakota lies the now reconstructed Fort Abraham Lincoln. From there, a column of 1,000 men, marched west on a spring day in May 1876 to fight a group of rebellious Plains Indians led by the charismatic chief Tatanka Íyotake (better known as

Sitting Bull), who had refused to move his people into a reserve.

The column from Dakota was under the command of Brigadier General Alfred Terry and was one of three forces mobilised against the hostile Indians. In the north-west, Colonel John Gibbons led a column from Fort Ellis in Montana, while further south, Brigadier General George Crooks ►

It took artist and veteran soldier Edgar Paxson almost 20 years to complete his painting 'Custer's Last Stand' (1899).

**“CUSTER’S FEARLESS AND IMPULSIVE STYLE WAS GIVEN FREE REIN ON THE BATTLEFIELD”**



## LITTLE BIGHORN, 1876

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



George Armstrong Custer (1839-1876) was a general in the North's Union Army during the Civil War. Photo taken in the 1860s.

► was marching with a third column from Fort Fetterman in Wyoming.

The strategy was quite simple: the three columns would converge on the valley of the Little Bighorn River, a short distance from the American Indian camp. Once there, they would regroup to fight an unknown number of Indians who, according to intelligence, had gathered in the area. Planned as an offensive pincer manoeuvre, it was going to be one of the most epic battles in US military history.

The advancing US forces had no idea about enemy numbers, but they weren't worried. After all, what could a bunch of uncivilised 'redskins' do in the face of a disciplined army? A contributing factor to this sense of arrogance and invincibility may have been the fact that 1876 was the United States' centennial year. Celebrations of the young nation's first 100 years emphasised its scientific and technological progress and fêted its military 'achievement' of subjugating the indigenous population across the entire continent, except for a handful of remaining hinterlands.

Ironically, Sitting Bull and all the Plains Indians camped alongside the Little Bighorn River shared this feeling of invincibility. Objecting to treaty violations by the US government, about 10,000 Sioux and Cheyenne had left the reservations and gathered together under a common banner.

**SINCE 1860, THE** lives of the Plains Indians had been characterised by retreats and defeats. Then gold was found in the mountains of Montana, leading to more frequent clashes between these tribes and US federal forces. The large influx of gold diggers and pioneers, and the systematic slaughter of the huge bison population, posed a serious threat to the existence of the Plains Indians. Finally, they took up arms and Washington responded by deploying the army.

For several years, the fighting rippled back and forth. Although the army built several forts along the western frontier, the US forces had great difficulty fighting the highly mobile, guerilla-like Indians. In 1868, the parties made peace in Fort Laramie, Wyoming. Washington agreed to relinquish the newly built forts west of the Missouri River in South Dakota and east of the Bighorn Mountains. The area henceforth would belong to the Indians.

In 1873, however, new conflicts arose. A survey for a planned railroad expansion discovered gold in the Black Hills area, a territory ceded to the Plains Indians in the 1868 treaty. The discovery changed everything for the US government who immediately ditched the peace treaty and built Fort Abraham Lincoln to secure the safety of the railway construction workers and protect the thousands of gold diggers who had rushed in and settled on



Indian land. This led a large number of Sioux tribes, led by the war chief Crazy Horse, to join Sitting Bull outside the reservation. It was now only a matter of time before war would break out.

The column that marched from Fort Abraham Lincoln on 17th May, 1876 was thus part of a major military offensive. The last free Plains Indians were to be brought to heel and US interests secured – especially the gold deposits and railroad construction project. Of the 1,000 Dakota soldiers, 650 were cavalrymen from the famous 7th Cavalry Regiment. Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer had command of the horsemen who were regarded as heroes after their spectacular victory over the Cheyenne in 1868.

**DESPITE HIS YOUNG** age, Custer had already enjoyed a long and distinguished military career. During the American Civil War, he had served in the Union Army, where he quickly gained a reputation for being an ingenious, heroic and aggressive military commander. It was said that nothing raised his spirits like rattling sabres, smoking guns and bold attacks. It was this courage and eagerness that had fuelled his rapid promotion.

In 1861, the Civil War erupted, creating a sudden need for officers. Although Custer's grades at West Point were modest, he was soon appointed lieutenant. Two years later, at the age of 23, he was a general – the youngest in US history.

Custer's fearless and impulsive style was given free rein on the battlefield. Aggressiveness and an offence-orientated attitude were his hallmarks. He always attacked first and, in that way, dominated the battlefield. With this strategy, Custer won a number of important cavalry battles during the war, including playing a crucial role during the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863. The young Custer became known as the boy general with golden locks and a tailored uniform. He basked in the limelight.

After the Civil War, Custer was demoted to lieutenant colonel and sent west to fight 'the



**Under the 1868 treaty, all land between Missouri and the Bighorn Mountains belonged to the Indians. Then, in 1873, gold was found...**



**Sitting Bull (1831-1890) was the chief of the Hunkpapa tribe. Photo taken in 1885.**



# LITTLE BIGHORN, 1876

**The Plains Indians far outnumbered the US forces and half the warriors were equipped with modern firearms. Their unexpected strength explains why Custer was defeated so decisively.**

► hostiles'. He wasn't unduly distressed by the move: many of his fellow officers had been discharged once the war was over.

Whether Custer really was a skilled army commander when it came to American Indian combat is debatable. He had not won any major battles since 1868, but his superiors had confidence in his abilities. They knew that under his leadership there would be a confrontation, and a confrontation was what everyone wanted to see. No one imagined that George Armstrong Custer, the man who had survived 25 battles during the Civil War, would lead his cavalry regiment to its death and end his own days on the dusty prairie.

**ON 22ND JUNE**, after a 560-kilometre march across warm and rolling prairies, they found traces of an American Indian camp. Fresh tracks led in the direction of Powder Valley and the areas around the Little Bighorn river. Custer was encouraged. He was absolutely convinced that all the clues meant that the Plains Indians were spreading out. On the same day, Brigadier General Terry ordered Custer and his 7th Cavalry to act as the force's vanguard. Terry would take the rest of his Dakota column and march north-west towards a confluence of the Bighorn and Little Bighorn rivers where they expected to find the bulk of the Plains Indians. General Gibbons' Montana column, which had joined with the Dakota column from the north a few days earlier would accompany him.

General Crook's Wyoming column should also have joined Terry's by that time, but there was

no sign of his troops and no messages either. Unbeknown to Terry and Gibbons, Crook had been forced to retreat. On 17th June, fierce fighting had broken out at the River Rosebud between Crook's men and a combined force of Cheyenne and Sioux Indians led by Crazy Horse. The fighting had raged all day and had cost Crook dearly. However, the protracted attack by more than 500 Indians was just a taste of what was in store for Custer. Crook defended well and managed to keep his losses down to just two dead and 21 injured. But having burned through most of his ammunition and supplies, he was forced to retire.

Before he left Terry and Gibbons, Custer was offered the chance to take a Gatling gun as part of his vanguard force. The most powerful machine gun of its day, the Gatling gun was capable of firing up to 350 bullets per minute. However, Custer refused the offer. A campaign in the Black Hills two years earlier had convinced him that the powerful Gatling gun, which was pulled by four horses, was impractical. He wanted to be fast and mobile. Custer reasoned that to catch the Indians one had to move like the Indians.

**AS THE FORCE'S** vanguard, Custer was given free rein by Terry: "the Department Commander places too much confidence in your zeal, energy, and ability to wish to impose upon you precise orders which might hamper your action when nearly in contact with the enemy", was the exact wording.

Custer had his military ambitions served on a silver platter when he was selected as the force's





spearhead. Better still, he had been given the freedom to carry out the operation on his own if the opportunity arose. After briefing his officers, including Captain Frederick Benteen and Major Marcus Reno, an excited and pugnacious Custer set his regiment in motion. As he passed Gibbon, the general shouted: "Now Custer, don't be greedy. Wait for us." Custer laughed back.

Three days later, on 25th June, Custer's scouts found the Indians. The party returned to the main force with reports of a huge camp next to the river, in a valley hidden behind a steep ridge. They also revealed that they had been spotted by patrolling Indians, so it wouldn't be long before the enemy learned of Custer's position. That settled the case for Custer: they had to attack before the Indians had a chance to escape.

Boyer, one of Custer's most-trusted scouts, tried to dissuade his commander from making a precipitous assault. Another scout, George Herendeen, reminded Custer that Terry and Gibbon were only 50 kilometres away, but Custer would not hear of waiting to attack. The 7th Cavalry had been selected as the spearhead, and Terry had given him free rein. It was up to him to seize this chance and sound the charge.

**PREVIOUS BATTLES AGAINST** the Plains Indians had led Custer to believe that 'the white man' would always be victorious on an open battlefield. But never before had the 'redskins' had such superior numbers, and never before had so many Indians – gathered in one place – possessed such a large quantity of modern firearms. Nearly half of the fighters were armed with modern rifles and pistols rather than their traditional weapons, such as bows and arrows, tomahawks and knives. The Winchester rifle, with its lever-action mechanism was especially popular with the Indians. It was a fast weapon that allowed multiple shots between reloads and was significantly more effective than the army's slow Springfield long-arm, a breech-loading rifle that had to be reloaded after each shot.

Custer was unaware of the nature of the force he was facing and ordered his troops to advance. He was ready to encircle the camp and quickly divided his regiment into three forces, a decision that proved to have fatal consequences.

Captain Frederick Benteen was ordered to take his 118-man strong detachment and ride south in a wide arc to cut off the Indians if they tried to flee. A slightly larger force of 175 horsemen under Major Reno's command was to follow a creek into the valley, cross the Little Bighorn River and conduct a frontal attack on the camp. The frontal attack would act as a diversion, while Custer took his detachment of five companies – a total of 210 men – along the

## "CUSTER WOULD NOT HEAR OF WAITING TO ATTACK... IT WAS UP TO HIM TO SEIZE THIS CHANCE"

summit of the ridge before descending on the far side of the Indian camp. Then, turning his back on the ridge, he intended to cross the river and order a full charge against the camp's right flank. This tactic – a feint frontal attack followed by a flanking charge – was a classic cavalry manoeuvre that Custer had successfully performed many times in the past.

**AT 15.00, RENO'S** three companies crossed the river. He initiated the attack from the valley floor. The horsemen rode in assault formation at a fast trot against the camp, but a few minutes after the bugle had sounded the attack, Reno's men saw a colossal dust cloud approaching them. This wasn't dirt kicked up by a ragged band of a hundred or so hostiles which the major had expected, but the dust created by a thousand disciplined Indians who were riding straight towards them. Major Reno, who had little experience in fighting Indians, ordered his men out of their saddles and into a 200-metre long firing line. Suddenly Reno's attack had turned into a defence.

The nervous soldiers fired several salvos as soon as the first advancing Indians were within range of the Springfield rifle, at 400-500 metres. The situation was critical. Although the bullets felled some of the ponies' riders, it was only a matter of time before Reno's line would be enveloped. The swarm of Indians could not be stopped. The major ordered his men to mount up and head to a wooded area. It didn't help. Bullets and arrows whizzed past the soldiers' ears, and more and more of them fell.

The inexperienced major lost track of what was happening on the wider battlefield. He couldn't see Custer and wondered why he hadn't come to their rescue. Reno had sent a summons for help. In desperation, the panicked Reno ordered the retreat. The soldiers' disorganised flight cost them dearly. They managed to get out of the woodland and down to the river, but several were lost during the retreat. The major then needlessly crossed the river and headed up the ridge and entrenched himself on high ground that was later renamed Reno Hill. Almost a third of his soldiers were now either missing, wounded or dead.

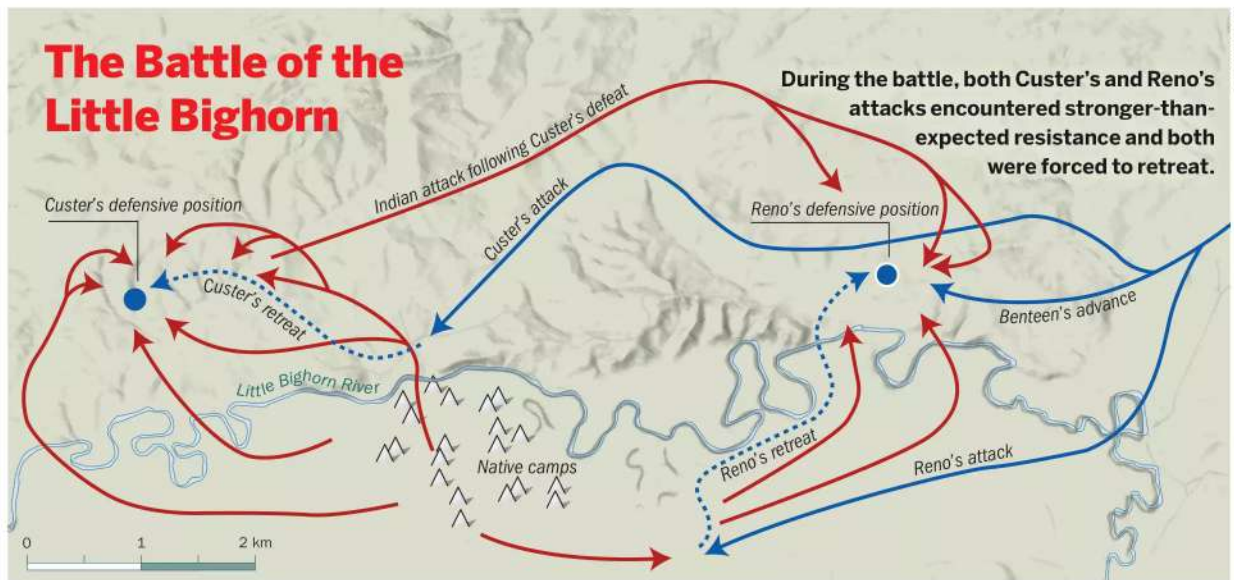
**AROUND THE SAME** time as Reno began his attack, Custer got his first view of the huge camp from his position up on the ridge. The camp, which ►



Colt revolver from 1874.



## LITTLE BIGHORN, 1876



► covered several square kilometres, was no doubt a daunting sight, but Custer had a reputation for inspiring his men before big battles. “Hold your horses in, boys,” Custer called out. “There are plenty of them down there for all of us.”

**CUSTER WAS SUFFICIENTLY** worried by the sight, however, to send a message to Benteen, ordering him to return at once and to bring the supply wagons, which held extra ammunition and weapons, with him. He wanted the captain and his 118 men alongside him as soon as possible, so that the combined force could be deployed against the camp. Soon after, he learned that Reno was in trouble. Instead of rescuing his major, Custer chose to play the long game and stick to his plan to attack the far, northern side of the camp while Reno kept the Indians busy in the south.

Custer's detachment reached the river at the foot of the ridge, but it couldn't find a suitable crossing point. The colonel, unfamiliar with the terrain, was then ambushed by a large party of Indians. Caught off guard, Custer was now fighting on his enemy's terms. Forced away from the river and up the nearest slope by 300–400 Indian warriors, Custer, like Reno, had to dig in on the heights.

The hard-pressed Custer searched in vain for Benteen's detachment. For some inexplicable reason, the captain, who was only 30 minutes from Custer, had not responded to his order. Unfortunately for Custer, Benteen's irritation over the conflicting order to make haste, while at the same time bringing up the heavy, slow-moving supply wagons, influenced his decision not to come to his commander's rescue. Instead, the captain

chose to join Major Reno's defence. His decision sealed Custer's fate. Without Benteen's support, Custer's soldiers were committed to a hopeless fight against an enemy that only increased in number.

Any hope of victory was long gone. In a final attempt to extricate his detachment, Custer led his remaining soldiers towards a nearby peak, later renamed Last Stand Hill. There, he and his men fought valiantly until they were finally overpowered. Not one of Custer's 210 men survived.

Just under six kilometres from the now fallen colonel, Reno and Benteen were down to 400 soldiers. Only when Terry and Gibbon's forces arrived on the bloody battlefield on 27th June – two days later – did they discover what had happened to Custer and his five companies. By then, the great Indian camp had disbanded. Custer's body was found on the ridge with a bullet in the chest and another in the temple. Unlike the other soldiers, he hadn't been scalped or mutilated in any way.

**THE CARNAGE AT** Little Bighorn sent shock waves across the US. The country was shaken to its core when news of the humiliating defeat hit the front pages. Not since the assassination of Abraham Lincoln 11 years earlier had the young nation been struck by such tragedy. Many refused to believe that the hero of the Civil War and the famous 7th Cavalry had been so comprehensively beaten.

The pressure was on to find an explanation and, of course, a scapegoat. Custer's contemporaries quickly blamed the colonel for the military failure. He was deemed to have been foolish and had led his troops to their death. He had thought of nothing but his own honour, glory and eternal fame.



There was some truth to the accusations. Custer behaved rashly and made several tactical mistakes – for example, he broke the age-old rule of never underestimating the enemy – but his actions were informed by prevailing attitudes at the time.

Custer's decision to order an attack without first gathering accurate information about the enemy's strength and position, had nothing to do with perusing a bold, offensive strategy. Like most of his military colleagues, he was of the opinion that 'white soldiers' were superior to all 'redskins', no matter how numerous or well-armed they were. When the brigadier gave him free rein, Custer did what he did best: he sounded the attack.

**THE BATTLE OF** the Little Bighorn is one of the most famous clashes in US history, although it was relatively small compared to other battles of the period. A total of 261 men from the 7th Cavalry fell that day, of which 210 were under Custer's direct command. It has been estimated that 100-200 Indians died in the fighting. Compared to the battles fought during the American Civil War, the Battle of the Little Bighorn should have been an insignificant event, a military footnote at most.

For the Indians, however, the battle was colossal: the greatest ever engagement between the Plains Indians and US forces. After the battle, close to 4,000 warriors were able to leave the battlefield as

## “CUSTER CHOSE TO PLAY THE LONG GAME AND STICK TO HIS PLAN”

victors. Ultimately, however, the battle proved to be the beginning of the end for those proud and free Indians. The US government wanted revenge, and shortly after the battle, they sent another force to the Montana prairie. A year after Custer's death, Sitting Bull escaped to Canada with his closest relatives. Crazy Horse surrendered in Nebraska a few days later. The Plains Indians were forced onto a reservation. The military's grip on the indigenous population was tighter than ever.

The very last fight between the Plains Indians and US forces, which ended the American Indian Wars, took place at Wounded Knee in South Dakota in 1890. There, a detachment from the 7th Cavalry killed 300 Sioux after falsely claiming that the Indians had started a revolt. The 7th Cavalry lost just 29 soldiers. American Indian accounts of the massacre claim that several of the soldiers shouted “Remember Little Bighorn” as they gunned down disarmed men, women and children. ★

Søren Aagaard is a writer of military history.

**Further reading:**  
**A Terrible Glory** (2009) by Jim Donovan  
 ★ **The Battle of Little Bighorn** (2008) by Ian Allan  
 ★ **Custer and the Little Bighorn** (2002) by Jim Donovan.

**In October 1876, Sitting Bull met with representatives of the US Army, but refused to surrender. The war continued for another year.**





## SINKING OF HMS VICTORIA, 1893

# Fatal error sank ship

To this day, no explanation exists for why Vice-Admiral George Tryon ordered his ships to turn into each other during an exercise in the Mediterranean in 1893. Officers tried to warn him, but Tryon ignored their pleas, and disaster unfolded.

Text: **ANDERS FAGER**

**G**eorge Tryon signed on as a cadet in the Royal Navy in 1848, aged 16. His future was a bright one: after all, he came from a wealthy family, was well-behaved, charming and had attended Eton College. Tryon was a spirited cadet – “ever full of energy and zeal” – but also bookish.

At this time, naval cadets were still being trained on sail-powered ships, but times were changing. HMS *Wellesley*, on which Tryon was first assigned, was a 74-gun third-rate ship of the same type Nelson commanded at Trafalgar in 1805. In 1848, however, *Wellesley* was accompanied by a paddle-steam tug. In good wind, *Wellesley* towed the small steamer, and when the wind dropped, the tug towed the ship.

At 19, Tryon was assigned to the 84-gun second-rate HMS *Vengeance*, one of the fastest sailing vessels in the fleet. Tryon was by now a signal midshipman and watched the Battle of Alma during the Crimean War in 1854 from the ship's maintop.

**IN 1855, TRYON** passed examinations at the Royal Naval College in Portsmouth and served on the *Royal Albert*. The ship was a modern technological marvel – designed as a traditional sailing three-decker with 121 guns, she'd been converted to screw propulsion during construction with the addition of a steam engine and propeller. Tryon found himself in the middle of a fierce arms race and was young and smart enough to understand and follow developments closely.

Steamers had been in use since the 1820s but were controversial with the Royal Navy. One argument against their deployment was that the fleet was usually on the open sea, but because 1840s “paddle

frigates” had to refuel with coal frequently, they could only operate close to a coastline. It was only once they discovered how to mount more efficient screw propellers on larger vessels that the navy's big ships converted to steam. In 1850, France launched the 90-gun *Napoleon*, capable of maintaining an impressive 12 knots (around 22 km/h). The addition of propellers to the *Royal Albert* was a direct response to this.

In 1855, Tryon accompanied the *Royal Albert* to Crimea and the ongoing siege of Sevastopol. One development during the war was that wooden vessels were increasingly vulnerable to explosive shells fired with ever-increasing range from naval artillery. This prompted a decade of experiments into various forms of iron plates as protective armour, but the idea of reinforcing existing wooden hulls was soon rejected in favour of building new iron-hulled ships.

In 1858, 26-year-old Tryon was back in Britain, and in 1861 he served as second-in-command of the newly built HMS *Warrior*. She was the world's first steam and sail-powered warship with an iron hull; a new marvel in modern engineering that the arms race would soon render obsolete.

**TRYON STUDIED STEAM** technology at the Royal Naval College, commanded the gunboat HMS *Surprise* in the Mediterranean, and found himself equally capable of expressing his opinions to the Admiralty in no uncertain terms while playing the role of dashing gentleman in uniform.

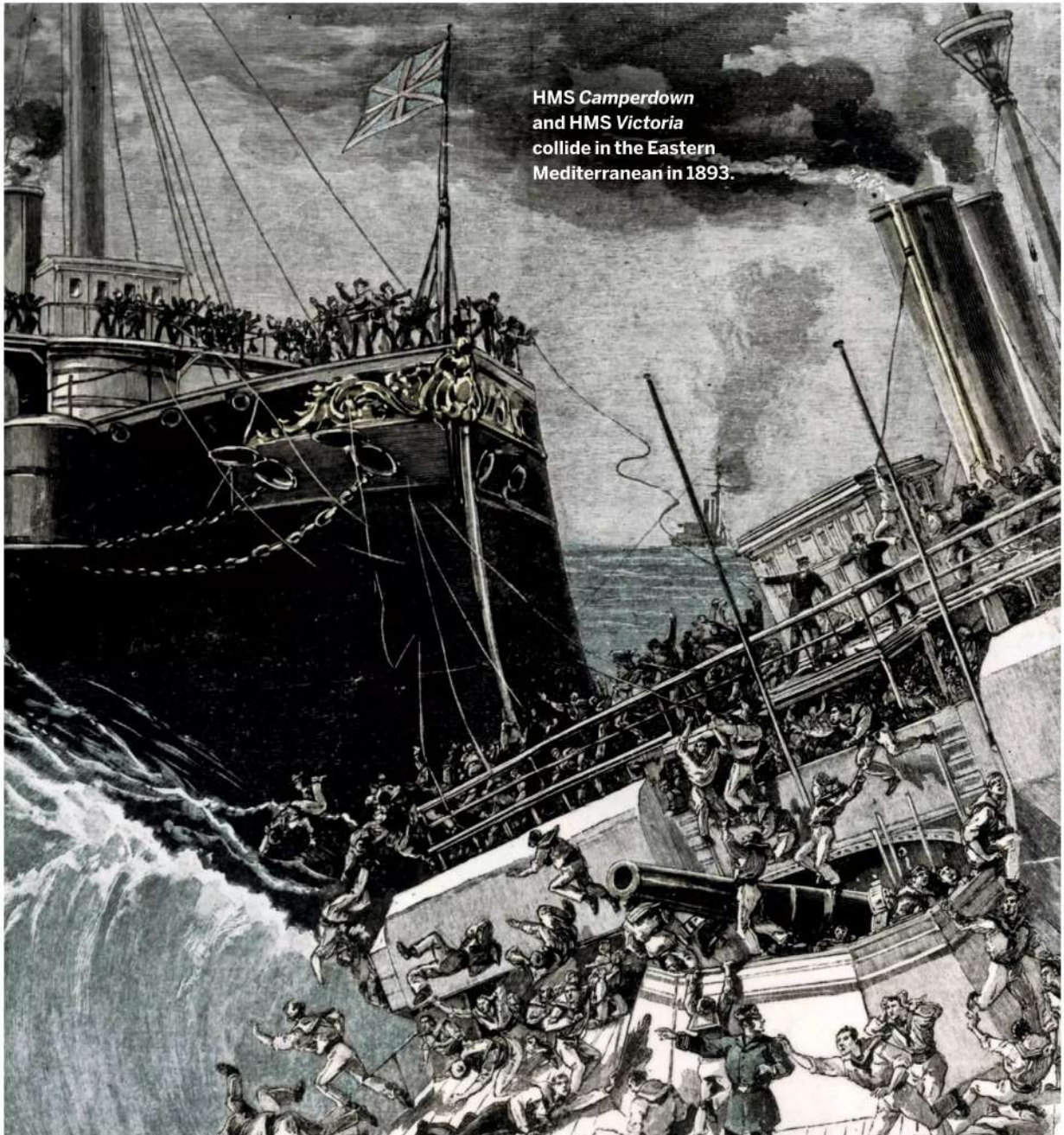
Tryon's career continued in the slow and winding fashion typical of an officer of his class. He became



George Tryon  
in 1857.

EASTON/WALKER AND BOUTALL





HMS Camperdown  
and HMS Victoria  
collide in the Eastern  
Mediterranean in 1893.

involved in new ship development and in 1873 took command of the newly built frigate HMS *Raleigh*. She had an unarmoured iron hull and steam boilers, and could be pushed to an unprecedented 16 knots (30 km/h). *Raleigh*'s tour took in far-flung corners of the empire before Tryon returned ashore in 1877 to help revise naval signalling regulations.

Steam engines and ever-increasing firepower aside, the fleet still signalled with flags using a system dating back to Nelson's time. Signalling was Tryon's obsession, and he was convinced the old techniques whereby several signal flags were hoisted up and down the masts to issue

**“HMS *Raleigh* [had] steam boilers, and could be pushed to an unprecedented 16 knots”**

precise orders were outdated. The system was too complicated. Further, future battles would be fought at distance, making the flags difficult to see.

**TRYON RETURNED TO** the Mediterranean fleet in 1878 and was given command of another technological marvel. HMS *Monarch* had only ►

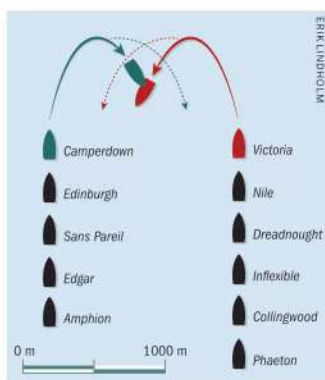


# SINKING OF HMS VICTORIA, 1893

► one-fifth the guns of Nelson's *Victory*, but the four largest sat in pairs in pivoting twin turrets, a brand new concept for battleships. During the latter half of the 19th century, these large battleships never went into battle with one another, so many of their underlying deficiencies were never exposed. Tryon's four years on *Monarch* were spent sailing unchallenged around the Mediterranean, flexing the British Empire's naval muscles without having to use them.

Tryon's technocratic bent didn't hinder his career, and he found himself among the navy's elite ranks when he was appointed Permanent Secretary to the Admiralty, advancing plans for a naval intelligence service. In 1884, aged 52, he was appointed rear admiral and was sent to Australia to command the Australian Station. Returning home three years later, Tryon was a principal player in three annual naval exercises that generated fierce debate in 1888-1890. The manoeuvres set modern ships against one another, and Tryon proved a brilliant tactician. He was innovative – irritatingly so to his colleagues – and treated the exercise as a rehearsal for war rather than a series of games. Squabbles broke out, centred around Tryon's ruthless tactics and the way he showed up his fellow admirals in the mock battles.

**IN AUGUST 1891,** Vice-Admiral Tryon was named commander-in-chief of the prestigious Mediterranean Station, based in Malta. It was the highlight of his career and he made sure the fleet took part in rigorous exercises to keep it battle-ready. He tested a new, simplified signal system – using T and A flags only – during large-scale manoeuvres that were essentially a 'follow my leader' instruction for all ships to monitor and follow the movements of the flagship. The British Empire's Mediterranean fleet had rarely been drilled so vigorously, and



**Various theories have subsequently been put forward about what Tryon meant by his order, including one claiming the columns should have crossed over each other's paths (dotted arrows).**

several ship commanders found Tryon demanding. He loved to keep them on their toes and issue commands with no warning. This led to grumbles because it effected social life aboard ship. The exercises also proved harmful to the vessels: in January 1892, the fleet's flagship, HMS *Victoria*, ran aground. *Victoria*, which was successfully refloated and repaired, was the very latest battleship: she was the Royal Navy's first to be powered by a steam turbine, armed with two heavy 410-mm guns that although mounted low, made the ship dangerously unstable.

**ON 22ND JUNE,** 1893, Tryon led a major manoeuvre off the coast of Syria (now part of Lebanon). 11 battleships and cruisers took part, and for some reason, they'd decided not to use Tryon's new TA system, but instead reverted to the older, more complicated signal system. It's difficult to determine the reasons for this, but the vice-admiral was stubborn and liked to keep his subordinates on their toes. The plan was to get them used to acting independently in unforeseen situations.

Tryon organised his fleet in two parallel columns. He led the right column in *Victoria*, while his deputy, Rear Admiral Albert Markham, commanded the left from *Camperdown*. The columns were around six nautical cables (about 1,100 metres) apart as they sailed at around ten knots towards the coast. The plan was for both columns to make a complicated about-turn and head to sea again. This involved turning inwards towards the other column in a semicircle before steering in the opposite direction with significantly less distance between the columns. How close the columns should be before attempting this complicated manoeuvre was nervously discussed behind Tryon's back. Was it the six cables as he'd ordered? Didn't the vessels have a turning circle of around three cables? Two



semicircles three cables in diameter would produce a collision, surely? The vice-admiral gave conflicting advice – agreeing verbally it should be eight cables but providing written instructions to keep it at six and then confirming the latter order. The order was given to signal the turn.

On *Camperdown*, Markham was both alarmed and bewildered by the order. But when *Victoria* signalled an impatient “WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?”, Tryon’s deputy ordered his column to come about.

**VICTORIA AND CAMPERDOWN** turned towards each other at more than a kilometre away, but steam battleships of the late 19th century turned slowly and sluggishly. They were incapable of performing sudden evasive manoeuvres, which is what made early torpedoes – however primitive – devastatingly effective. It soon became clear the two ships were heading straight for each other. Perhaps one should give way?

One might wonder what Vice-Admiral Tryon was thinking in the final minutes before the collision. Did he curse his subordinates for acting on his suicidal orders, or was he convinced the fleet would perform another brilliant manoeuvre? Was it perhaps intend to be a cunning experiment in leadership, where Tryon had been waiting for some bold officer to take charge and reverse the order? Finally, Tryon ordered *Victoria* to reverse, but by then it was too late.

Late 19th century ironclads were equipped with ram bows for smashing into enemy ships. *Camperdown* drove into *Victoria*’s side and tore a large hole in her armour below the waterline. Markham immediately ordered full-reverse and managed to pull *Camperdown* free. Water tumbled into the gaping hole and within a few minutes the bow was submerged. Around them, the rest of Tryon’s squadron desperately tried to avoid colliding with either ship. HMS *Nile* came within 50 metres of hitting *Victoria*. On *Victoria*, orders

## “Finally, Tryon ordered *Victoria* to reverse, but by then it was too late”

were given to steer towards the coast, but the vessel soon became unmanageable. Within 15 minutes of the collision she capsized and sank. According to survivors, Tryon had been standing on the bridge muttering “it is entirely my fault” before going under with the ship. 385 of the 715-strong crew drowned.

*Camperdown* was also seriously damaged, which says a lot about the rationale behind having a battering ram on a 10,000-tonne battleship. But she stayed afloat, thanks to her crew who managed to stop the water pouring in – despite having left some of her essential watertight doors open during the exercise.

**THE DISASTER WAS** an embarrassment for the navy, and Tryon was blamed at the subsequent inquest. Many awkward questions were avoided, such as why *Camperdown* reversed so quickly from *Victoria* before ensuring *Victoria*’s bulkheads had been closed to keep her afloat, why no experienced officers on Tryon’s bridge made any serious attempts to avoid the collision, or why Markham accepted the order to run into the flagship. Nor did they discuss the fact that *Victoria*’s heavy guns made her unstable, contributing to her sudden sinking. The fault lay firmly with Tryon, the vice-admiral had apparently been struck by mental confusion of some kind. The investigation also laid much of the blame for what happened on Tryon’s TA signals, despite the fact they hadn’t been in use during the exercise.

Later, several different theories were put forward as to what Tryon’s actual intentions were. But all are based on very loose threads of evidence, and the main witness lies at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea. ❖

**Anders Fager** is a writer and reserve officer.

**Further reading:**  
**Admirals in Collision** (1959) by Richard Hough  
★ **Life of Vice-Admiral Sir George Tryon** (1897) by CC Penrose.

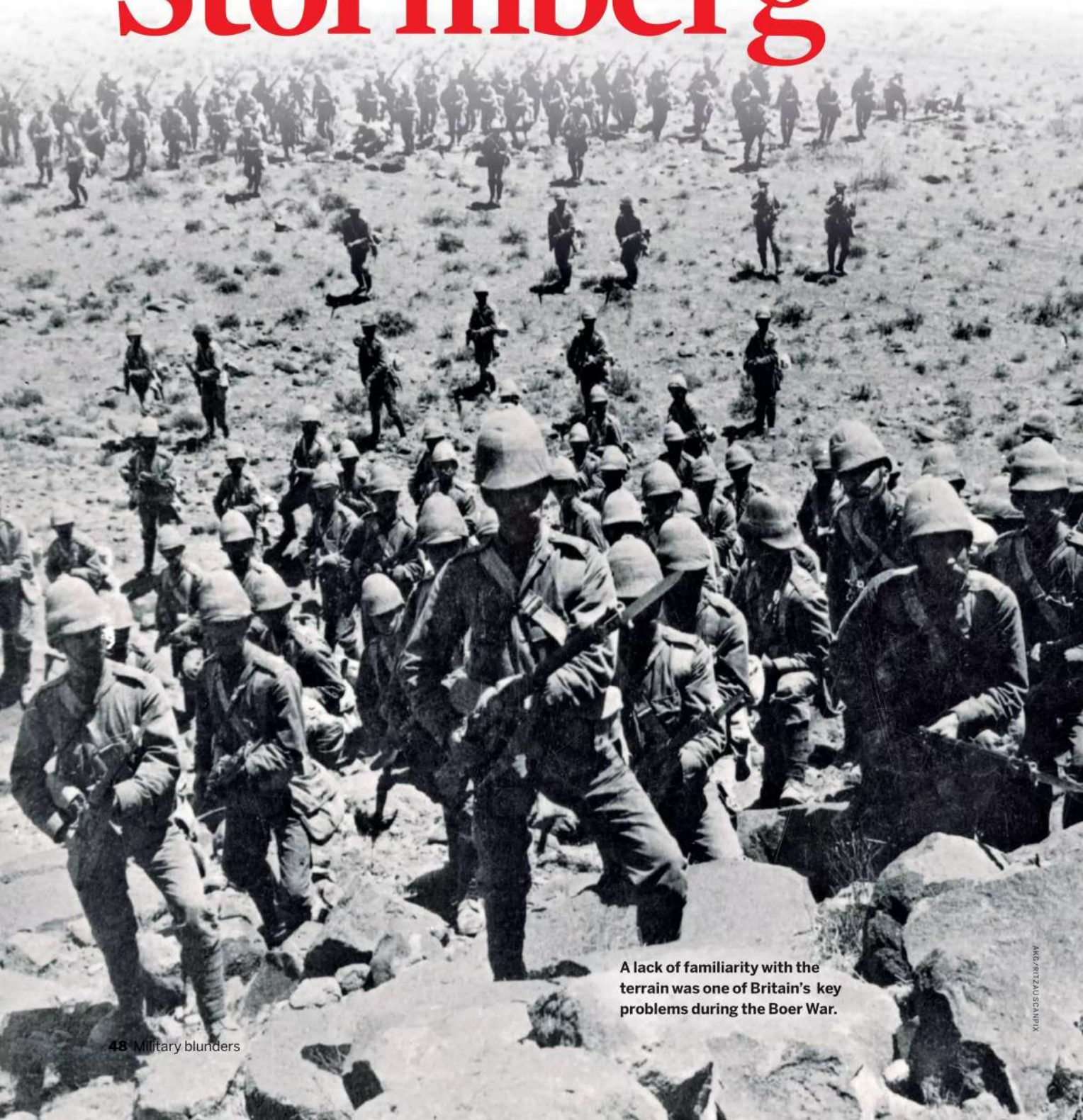
**HMS *Victoria* sinks after colliding with HMS *Camperdown*. Next to her lies HMS *Nile*, which came within 50 metres of hitting the *Victoria*.**





**STORMBERG, 1899**

# Battle of Stormberg



A lack of familiarity with the terrain was one of Britain's key problems during the Boer War.

AKG/RETNAUSCANPIX



British general William Gatacre thought the enemy had already taken Stormberg. It hadn't. If he had checked his assumptions, he could have taken a train all the way to Stormberg and secured it without a fight.

Text: Anders fager

**T**he Battle of Stormberg took place at the end of the first phase of the Second Boer War after the Boers invaded Cape Colony and besieged the cities of Kimberly and Ladysmith. In London, outraged politicians demanded that the cities be relieved, and the Boers taught a painful lesson about triggering a war with the most powerful empire in the world.

The period was later dubbed 'Black Week' by the British. General Redvers Buller and his shiny army had just arrived from Britain and immediately went on the offensive without the slightest idea of the forces ranged against them. They were in an unfamiliar terrain, trained for a different type of combat and led by officers who should never have been permitted to wage war, at least not against enemies who could fire back.

Buller's plan was to advance with three forces. He himself would lead the main force to relieve Ladysmith on the east side of the Orange Free State, while General Lord Methuen headed towards Kimberly on the west side. General William Gatacre's 3rd Division was to secure the Cape Midlands province, which lay immediately south of the Free State.

The governor of the province was afraid that the Free State Boers would invade Cape Midlands and capture the important Stormberg railway junction. He also feared they would incite rebellion among the Boer living in the province. The few British soldiers in the area had, on Buller's order, retired to Queenstown, 80 kilometres south of Stormberg, in early November. Thus, Gatacre's mission was to regain control of a recently abandoned area.

**MAJOR GENERAL SIR** William Forbes Gatacre was 57 years old, a small, wiry man with sharp features and a bushy moustache. Commissioned as an officer at 18, he was known as an energetic, capable commander and a stickler for rules. He had served for 15 years in India, in both war and peace. In the Battle of Atbara in 1898, he commanded one of the three brigades that successfully led the attack against 15,000 Sudanese rebels.

Gatacre's men called him "General Backacher" because of his physically demanding regime, but

also saw him as fair and considerate. He liked to draw and press flowers. He also took pains to keep himself in peak physical condition and his body was all hard muscle – Winston Churchill once described him as "the exhausted victim of his own vitality". But his muscles wouldn't help him at Stormberg.

In November 1899, Gatacre began to gather his division in Queenstown, but it wasn't long before its strength was reduced. The first problem was that his men, who had come directly from a British autumn, suffered in the African summer heat and many fell prey to dysentery. Then Buller requisitioned half of Gatacre's battalions to reinforce the two relief operations. Soon, Gatacre's division of 10,000 men was reduced to three infantry battalions, two batteries of field artillery, 300 mounted infantry and around 1,000 men drawn from local South African corps.

**ALL IN ALL**, the general would advance with 3,000 men – two-thirds from the other side of the world – through a landscape the enemy had grown up in. But his men weren't the only ones who were unfamiliar with the terrain and the events unfolding upon it. Gatacre didn't realise that the Boers had not yet taken Stormberg – in fact, he had no idea where they were. If only he had realised that the junction was undefended, he could have taken his troops all the way there by train and secured it without a fight.

He did receive news from his colleagues, however, including how Lord Methuen had clashed with the Boers twice, on the 23rd and 28th November, and had driven them from the battlefield.

What Lord Methuen neglected to say was that while the Boers had finally withdrawn, their abilities should not be underestimated: they were good shooters, cunning tacticians and by no means intimidated by any supposed British superiority.

Buller and Lord Methuen advanced, and presumably they pushed Gatacre to do the same. ►

**"Gatacre didn't realise that the Boers had not yet taken Stormberg"**



**The railway towards Stormberg.**



# STORMBERG, 1899

**Major General  
Sir William  
Forbes Gatacre  
(1843-1906).**

► On 8th December, 1899, Gatacre was told that the Boers had taken Stormberg junction 12 days earlier.

Suddenly, after weeks of delay, Gatacre woke up and got busy. Stormberg must be recaptured immediately – by means of a daring raid. He drew up a map and laid out his plans. The force could be transported by train to Molteno, the closest railway station to Stormberg that was still in British hands. Gatacre took with him two regular battalions, two batteries and his mounted infantry, a total of 2,600 men. The units that had previously been stationed at Stormberg remained in Queenstown, the general seemingly preferring crude maps to expert local knowledge. According to the steely bodied Gatacre, it was eminently feasible to march 20 kilometres across an unknown landscape at night in a flanking manoeuvre around the Boer position. Then it would just a simple matter of attacking up the steep slopes of the Kissieberg Hill, which dominated the terrain around the Stormberg station, and waiting for the Boers to flee.

**IN HIS ACCOUNT** of the war, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle claimed that, “The idea of a swift sudden attack upon Stormberg was excellent”. Buller, Gatacre’s own commander, agreed and believed that the fact that the plan had failed was simply unfortunate: “I think you were quite right to try the night attack and hope [you have] better luck next time.”

Of course, it was tremendously unfortunate that Gatacre suddenly became so busy that he couldn’t make time for even rudimentary scouting. It was also exceptionally unlucky that the majority of Gatacre’s men had to spend a blazing hot afternoon in open rail cars because a train carrying more troops failed to arrive on time – as a result, the men left Molteno two hours late and night had fallen by the time they arrived. Extreme bad luck then caused

Gatacre to switch to a longer route than had been originally planned, one that took the troops along a route that could be easily missed in the dark, leaving them to march all through the night, across a rocky and jagged wilderness where all the ravines looked alike and there was no sign of the correct trail.

There are mixed opinions about whether Gatacre had any scouts with him, whether he killed them in anger or whether he had such exceptional bad luck that he left the only remaining men among his force with local knowledge – former Cape Midland policemen – in Molteno. Or perhaps his scouts simply weren’t as good at finding their way across the landscape at night as they had claimed?

**AS THE MORNING** approached on 10th December, 1899, it became increasingly clear that they had lost their way. Everyone involved had been awake for more than 24 hours. The men were exhausted.

Amazingly, the defenders at Stormberg Station were still unaware of Gatacre’s force. Kommandant Jan Hendrik Olivier, who had been chosen to lead the 2,000 Boers, didn’t seem to have a particularly sharp military mind. This might have cheered the attackers had they known, especially when the dawn light revealed that they had finally reached their target, Kissieberg Hill, but their bad luck was far from over.

Suddenly a Krupp artillery gun fired from Kissieberg, and everything went to hell. Without waiting for orders, the vanguard of Gatacre’s column, over 600 men, spontaneously ran forward to storm the hill. Several pickets stationed on the heights dropped what they were doing and opened fire on Gatacre’s main force, which was exposed on the valley floor. The British artillery began to fire on the defenders’ cannon, but only succeeded in hitting their own vanguard whose spontaneous charge came to a sudden halt. This wasn’t due to the British cannonballs whizzing about their ears, but because the hillside was almost vertical – too steep to storm. But the sheer angle also made it impossible for the defenders to hit anything tight against the foot of

## The Boer War, 1899–1902

★ Needing help to exploit recently discovered gold and diamond deposits, the two Boer states, The Republic of the Transvaal and Orange Free State, allowed British nationals to settle in their territories. But these *uitlanders* (foreigners) were not given citizenship rights. Britain intervened on behalf of the *uitlanders*, sparking a power struggle throughout South Africa. When the Boer War (also called the

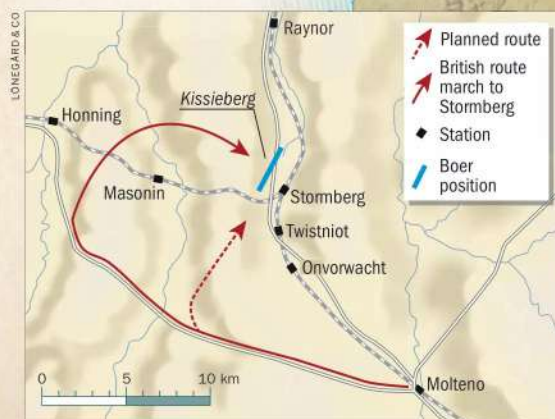
Second Boer War) broke out in October 1899, the numerically superior Boers won several early victories. But once the British received reinforcements, they occupied Johannesburg, Bloemfontein and Pretoria. The war ended in 1902 when Britain controlled all South Africa.

The Boers were immigrants from the Netherlands, Germany and France, who arrived in South Africa from the mid-17th century on.

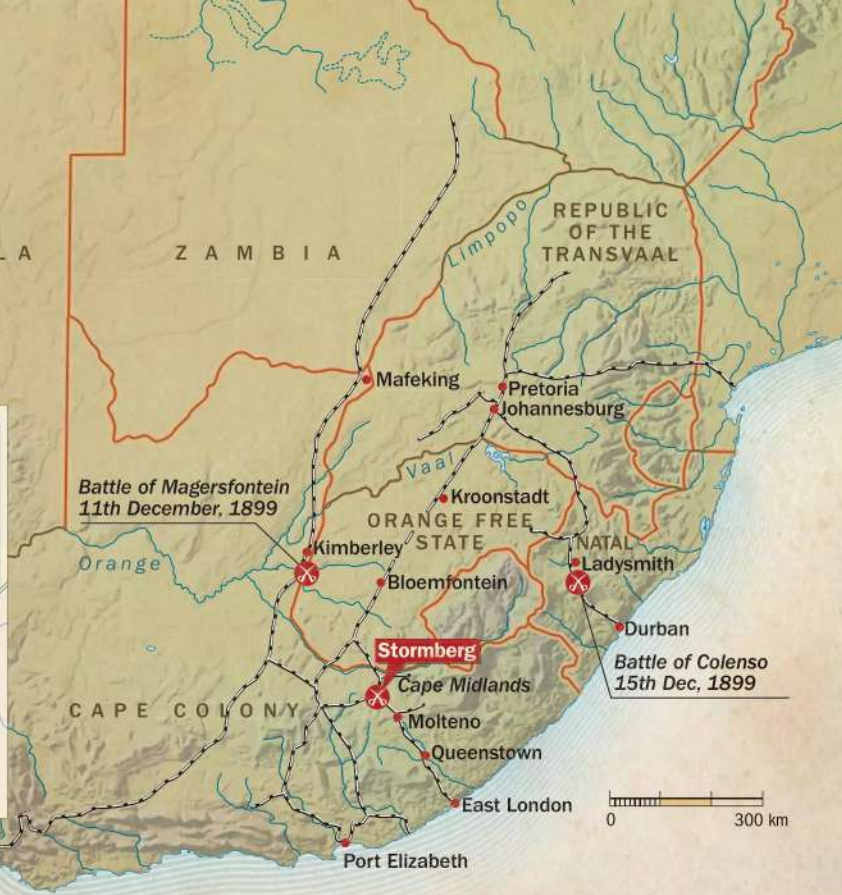


# Battle of Stormberg

★ 10th December, 1899



The route march undertaken by Gatacre's three infantry battalions between Molteno and Stormberg was considerably longer than originally planned.



The British army landed in Cape Town, Port Elizabeth and East London. Then three columns marched north to the besieged cities of Kimberly and Ladysmith and the railway junction at Stormberg.

the hill. The 600 or so British soldiers decided to make the best of things and settled down to rest.

Gatacre tried to take control, but no display of personal courage would stabilise the situation. There were no walls to storm or mass ranks to overwhelm as there had been in the Sudan. Gatacre's column had, with unprecedented bad luck, marched into an accidental ambush. It was only the fact that the Boers were equally undisciplined that saved the British from being slaughtered. Soon the retreat was sounded – or maybe Gatacre's men simply began to fall back on Molteno under their own steam and the general was swept along with the rest. The Boers tossed hand grenades as the British fled eastward.

**ONCE OUTSIDE THE** range of the guns on Kissieberg, Gatacre could probably have gathered his men and made another attempt. But he was as tired as his soldiers and the retreat continued.

Towards evening, the fleeing soldiers arrived at Molteno, where the exhausted men collapsed. Two guns and more than 700 men were lost. Gatacre cried when he heard the news. It was only later that he realised the terrible, shameful truth: only 29 of his men had been killed and 57 wounded. The rest had simply been forgotten. They were the soldiers who had stormed the Kissieberg Hill only to be

**“The 600-odd men were left with little choice and meekly raised a white flag to signal their surrender”**

left at the foot of the slope by their fleeing general. Realising that they had been abandoned, the 600-odd men were left with little choice and meekly raised a white flag to signal their surrender. The Boers lost only six killed and 27 wounded, but were unable to capitalise on their victory.

The following day, Lord Methuen's column was shot to smithereens at Magersfontein, and on 15th December, Buller's force met the same fate at Colenso. Black Week was over. Over 2,500 British soldiers had been killed or wounded, while the Boers lost just a tenth of that number.

The scandal saw heads roll in Parliament and at British Army HQ, but Gatacre managed to keep his post. In an effort to raise morale, some optimists pointed out that while the three forces had failed to achieve their goals, they hadn't lost any territory either. No one had the heart to point out that the Boers had not actually tried to take any land. 🇬🇧

**Anders Fager** is a writer and reserve officer.

**Further reading:**  
**The Boer War** (2003) by Denis Judd and Keith Terrance Surridge  
 ★ **The Great Boer War** (1976) by Byron Farwell.




Gallipoli, 1915

# TRAPPED UNDER THE CLIFFS

When the British invasion of Gallipoli failed, a densely packed community of soldiers were left on a few square kilometres of rocky beach in Turkey. For more than six months, the soldiers endured a combination of stench, heat and Turkish shells.

Text: **ANDERS FAGER**



Anticipating an exciting adventure ahead, the Anzac soldiers landed at Gallipoli on 25th April, 1915. 24 hours later one in every three men had been killed or wounded.



**T**here is an anecdote, relayed by Les Carlyon in his book *Gallipoli*: “The Turks tell a story about two New Zealanders they took prisoner in August. The Turks asked them where they were from.

“New Zealand, they said.

“Never heard of it, the Turks replied.

“Several Germans nearby overheard the exchange. They told the Turks that New Zealand was in the South Pacific, literally at the other end of the world.”

It was the end of July 1915 on the Gallipoli Peninsula, the headland that separates the Aegean from the Black Sea. The British effort to reach Constantinople had been going on for two months, but had stalled through poor planning, difficult terrain and furious fighting by the Turks. The British held two bridgeheads, which were pretty much the same territory they took on the day they stepped ashore. Surrounded by mountains and Turkish machine guns, it was the attackers who



**The Anzac enclave was on the west side of Gallipoli.**

were under siege. Where this was most evident was at the Anzac bridgehead, a slice of rocky beach surrounded by cliffs.

This bridgehead – the enclave ‘Anzac Cove’ – was named after the Australian-New Zealand Army Corps or ‘Anzac’ and from above resembled a weird ant’s nest. More than 20,000 soldiers lived within this two-kilometre-square area of scorching beaches, cliffs and gorges. Virtually all the Turkish positions were situated at a higher elevation, and they could watch every move in the enclave.

A couple of times an hour every day, the Turkish battery at Gaba Tepe – known as ‘Beachy Bob’ – shelled the Anzac positions.

“Why are you here?” the Turks demanded.

“Well,” the New Zealanders explained, “We thought the war would be like playing rugby.”

**THE 1ST AUSTRALIAN** Infantry Division was established after the outbreak of war in 1914. Britain had entered the hostilities, and her colonies came to her aid without hesitation. All the recruits were ▶

## “SURROUNDED BY MOUNTAINS AND TURKISH MACHINE GUNS, IT WAS THE ATTACKERS WHO WERE UNDER SIEGE”





# GALLIPOLI, 1915

**The short distance between the trenches made it dangerous for soldiers to stick their heads over the parapet. They spent a lot of time tracking the enemy through periscopes.**

► volunteers, rather than conscripts, and remained so throughout the war. Initially, they saw it as a great adventure and a chance to see the world, and the doctors who enlisted the soldiers were able to pick and choose their men. The volunteers had to be between 19 and 38 years old, and at least 165 centimetres tall. Aborigines and men with bad teeth or feet were rejected. The Australian soldier was overall in excellent physical shape. British observers were amazed at how vigorous and healthy they seemed. John Masefield went as far as to describe them as “strange, sunburned, half-naked men [who] moved at their work with the bronze bodies of gods”.

**THE RECRUITS WERE** issued with standard equipment, with the wide-brimmed Australian hat as the only local detail. They were equipped with the sturdy Martini-Henry rifle and associated bayonet. They practiced shooting (something most of them could do already), drill exercises (which they found absurd) and bayonet combat (which turned out to be completely obsolete on the battlefield).

Australia's army tripled in size during the autumn of 1914, but they lacked experienced officers. Apart from some veterans of the Boer War, there were few in the army who had been anywhere near a war. They interpreted the lack of new directives from London to mean that drilling, shooting and bayonet practice constituted an adequate training regime. They learned how to quickly and resolutely advance in line against the enemy. What else could one train for? Were hand grenades and shovels something you needed to learn how to use? Or machine guns? Not

that the latter had been delivered, despite promises that each battalion would have two such weapons.

In the spring of 1915, the division comprising 15,000 men was sent by ship to Egypt. Guarding the Suez Canal against virtually nothing, however, hardly prepared them for modern warfare. Nor were the Australians the world's most-disciplined soldiers, and they soon gained a reputation for being both coarse and brutish. The soldiers' unwillingness to salute, and their ever-dwindling respect for commanders they didn't know, was not appreciated by British officers. A joke circulated that Australians answered “who goes there?” with “what the f\*\*k does it have to do with you?”

Australians were paid six shillings a day – around £19 in today's money – which was significantly more than soldiers from the rest of the Empire. It was another source of irritation, but it made Australians popular at bars and brothels. On Good Friday, 1915, the division fought its first ‘action’, the Battle of the Wazzir, when they rioted in Cairo's brothel district of Haret el Wasa'a.

Soon, the Anzacs were reorganised to become part of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force. It was to be deployed against the Ottoman Empire, a fact of which even the Turks were aware, its purpose having been telegraphed by its original name: Constantinople Expeditionary Force. What was unclear was how they would do this. The general feeling was that Turks were unworthy opponents. Hadn't the Anzacs been recruited to fight the Germans? The soldiers were still unprepared for modern warfare, however. Every man was issued with a shovel, and that was that.

**IN APRIL, ANZAC** troops were transported to the Greek island of Lemnos. The island was the base for the expeditionary corps, and was buzzing with troops. The men discussed the brothels and other interesting aspects of Constantinople, but did very little training. Each man was given 200 rounds, two empty sandbags and food for two days. Soldiers and junior officers were not informed of any plans. They were being asked to land ashore, climb out of the boats and advance on the Turks with their bayonets. It was important that they pushed inland. The troops had no grenades, insufficient first aid equipment, and no idea what they were supposed to be doing. The 1st Division's troops were later dubbed ‘adventurers’ or ‘tourists’ because on 24th April, 1915, the night before the Gallipoli landing, they still believed that war was an adventure.

Just before dawn on 25th, the first Australians splashed ashore. Their weapons were unloaded, because they had been instructed not to start firing until the sun rose. The idea was to surprise the Turks with cold steel. Unfortunately, the Turks were not in





the least bit surprised. They did not flee, but opened fire with everything they had. The Anzac's sense of wonder and adventure quickly evaporated.

The landing was a fiasco from the first moment. The Australians had not even managed to land at the right spot but had missed their intended target by almost three kilometres. Instead of sandy beaches and soft rounded hills, they faced a nightmare of rocks, cliff faces and ravines. Moreover, Australia's 1st Division landed in terrible chaos and failed to act as a unit. Individual troops did as they had been instructed – threw down their rucksacks and pushed inland – but they acted in small groups without an overall plan. In many cases, the soldiers tried to climb steep cliffs.

**BY THE NEXT** day, one third of the 1st Division was either dead, wounded or missing. On the beaches lay piles of rucksacks that no one would ever come to fetch. 2,000 men had disappeared. They had enthusiastically pushed inland and were never seen again. The Turks took no prisoners in the counterattack. One soldier managed to advance almost two kilometres inland and come back alive, but no Anzacs would push forward again. Instead, they did their best to dig in and waited for orders.

There was talk of evacuation. Once the element of surprise was lost, there was no way to move forward, especially as Turkish counterattacks drove them away from all key positions. Despite this, the decision was made that the Anzacs should stay. Time was needed to evacuate the thousands of wounded who had been assembled on the beaches because the Anzacs had no resources to care for them.

The defence system developed over the first few weeks. Anyone who was not carrying wounded down to the beach or water up to the line, chopped trees or dug defensive works. The little they knew about what defences should look like was based on reports of trenches dug in the flat, soil plains of France. But the enclave was perched on sandstone cliffs – the beach was the only place to realistically dig. At the top of the cliffs you had to scratch depressions in the rock as best you could. The troops did not have the appropriate tools or equipment, and it took many days for all the trees in the enclave to be felled.

**AGAINST ALL ODDS**, the trenches grew. They meandered up over rocks and ravines. The lookout posts were given names like Baby 700, Lone Pine (described as “of all the bastards of places this is the greatest bastard in the world” by one soldier) and Quinn's Post, where the trenches were laid with a sheer drop behind them. The troops dug shelters, connecting the trenches and observation



Wounded soldiers were carried from the cliff face to the field hospital on the sheltered beach.

## “THE TURKS... DID NOT FLEE FOR THEIR LIVES, BUT OPENED FIRE WITH EVERYTHING THEY HAD”

posts. Eventually, all the building materials of modern warfare were shipped ashore, including timber and sheets of plywood, barbed wire and telephone cables. Two hospitals were built and a jetty on the beach, and everywhere there were stacks of supplies. And all the while Beachy Bob kept up its relentless shelling. The main road up to the front line was named “Shrapnel Gully”. It was later covered over and transformed into a tunnel 500 metres long, where caravans of soldiers dragged food, building materials and five-gallon cans of water up before carrying their wounded comrades back down.

**THE SOLDIERS SLEPT**, ate and rested in their shelters. Everyday life consisted of manning the lookout post, working on the system of defences or carrying equipment from the beach. Duty at a ▶



## GALLIPOLI, 1915

- post meant using a periscope to observe the Turks. Despite depictions in World War I films, troops didn't fight continually across the trenches – far from it. But there was always a danger that the enemy would try a raid, or that individuals could attract the attention of an enemy sniper. For that very reason, it was important to avoid General Birdwood, the commander of the Anzac troops. Although the general was popular because he wandered the trenches, discussing problems with the troops, the red hat he wore as part of his uniform unfortunately drew the attention of the Turks' sharpshooters.

Gradually a shift system was introduced in the enclave. Troops first spent a few weeks at the front line, before being given a few days of easier service down on the beach. There they could swim, rest and, for example, help unload boats and make 'jam bombs' – hand grenades from empty canned food tins. For those fighting in Europe, easier service meant sleeping outside of enemy range, and perhaps getting some proper food, but the Anzacs – even those on easier service – were always within firing range, both from shells and from snipers. Death could occur at any time.

**THE BIGGEST PROBLEM** for the Anzacs was the lack of water. The few springs found in the enclave soon emptied or became fouled, and instead they had to bring water in by barge. The daily ration was just over two litres per person. The enclave needed nearly 50 cubic metres of water a day, something that had not been thought of before the landing, and which took time to organise. The first days on land were hell, especially for the wounded, and dehydration was a continual problem.

All the men prepared their own food. Most often it was a variant of "Anzac stew", a meat dish where you added what you had in a little water that you heated. The basic products were rusks, tea, sugar and bully beef – cooked in brine and preserved under questionable sanitary conditions. If you were lucky you got extra cheese, bacon or jam. Vegetables and bread were almost completely absent. The men dreaded eating bully beef. Canned

food fermented in the sun, and the heavy salt content was injurious given the scarcity of water. The soldiers would have endless discussions about how the bully beef could be best prepared to make it fit for human consumption. Fights broke out over boxes of Maconochie's Corned Beef, which was seen as the only variant that could be accused of being edible. There are stories of how soldiers threw cans of bully beef to the Turks and thus incurred shelling because the Turks thought they were trying to poison them. But some bartering with the enemy did take place. The Turks had fresh bread, so they threw over slices of bread in hopes of getting boxes of milk or cigarettes in return.

The Australians had landed in the spring, when the weather at Gallipoli was at its most comfortable and quite similar to what they were used to at home. The further into the summer they went, however, the greater the problems caused by the heat. It was difficult to sleep at night, and they were plagued by dehydration, although most Australians were used to outdoor work and fared okay. While the thin uniforms helped in the summer heat, they provided little protection during the autumn and winter nights, and many froze to death or suffered from frostbite. Feet and toes were often amputated after soldiers were forced to wade through water and mud for hours.

The trenches lay almost exclusively on lower ground, which became a major problem when the autumn rains came. Water flowed downhill until it hit a ditch – or a trench – and filled it up. The Turks sat up on the cliff tops and watched the Australians splash around in water-filled trenches and struggle to build drainage ditches. The fact that the rain also washed down several months-old corpses to the trenches did not make the situation any better.

**THE ANZAC COVE** would have given any health inspector a nightmare. The whole area stank to an unimaginable extent and could be smelled several kilometres away. Here 20,000 men lived amid dead bodies and rubbish, with millions of flies in the air. The rats, who lived on a diet consisting of corpses and food scraps, were unusually fat and not in the least afraid of humans.

The most common health problems in the enclave were various gastric disorders. The soldiers called them "Gallipoli gallop" or said they suffered from "Turkish trots". Various forms of exhaustion and nervous disorders were also common.

Those who were injured knew what to expect. Just getting a wounded soldier down from the front line to the beach was difficult. If they couldn't transport themselves down to the doctor under their own steam they were at a major disadvantage. And on the beach they could wait days for transport

### Respect for the enemy

★ Respect for "Abdul" or "Johnny Turk," as the Turkish soldiers were dubbed by the Anzac troops, soon grew. They were an 'honest opponent' who was worthy of respect. Both sides were stuck in the same

heat, the same cloud of flies and the same rocky trenches. They understood each other and made every effort to take care of each other's wounded, and they treated their prisoners of war well.



to Lemnos, in the crazy heat and surrounded by thousands of flies. There were no painkillers or blood plasma. Stomach and chest injuries were usually fatal and always accompanied by terrible pain. Severe bleeding was also a death sentence, as were severe burns.

**MORE THAN 10,000** Anzac Cove soldiers died. Those who had been transported to Lemnos hospitals were buried there, otherwise they were buried within the enclave. Soldiers who died on ships were buried at sea. Sometimes they washed ashore, where they were buried again. Today, there are over 20 cemeteries in the enclave, with graves both for named soldiers and mass graves for those who could not be identified.

At least 20,000 Turks also died on the heights above the Anzac troops. Those who died on Anzac soil were buried there, for sanitary reasons. After the Turks' unsuccessful attempt to cross the enclave at the end of April, a ceasefire was agreed so that the Turks could clear their dead away from the area between the front lines. "That's politics," said a Turkish officer pointing to a series of graves. "That's diplomacy," he added, pointing to a pile of bodies.

A soldier who fell near one of his comrades could often be identified and immediately confirmed dead. Men from other divisions were more difficult to identify. They checked their pockets for ID tags, papers and other things. The dead were buried behind the front when the opportunity arose.

Since there was never more than 500 metres of ground to the front of Anzac troops, and the ground was terribly rocky, it was easier said than done to dig a shallow grave. Later on, identifying a particular

## "THE MEN DREADED EATING BULLY BEEF. CANNED FOOD FERMENTED IN THE SUN"

soldier's grave was also difficult thanks to poor documentation coupled with added destruction from Beachy Bob's shells, which regularly hit the graves.

**THE FIRST NEWS** that reached Australia from Gallipoli were enthusiastic newspaper articles about noble struggles with glinting blades. Not until a few weeks later did the telegrams of deaths begin to be distributed to relatives. After the war, the beach was finely combed and large numbers of skeletons found. Small details such as buckles or buttons made it sometimes possible to see if the dead man was a Turk or an Australian. Name tags made it possible to identify some of the men who had been missing since the landing. But most were shoved into mass graves.

"There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmeds to us where they lay side by side," noted Kemal Atatürk, Turkish commander at Gallipoli and future president.

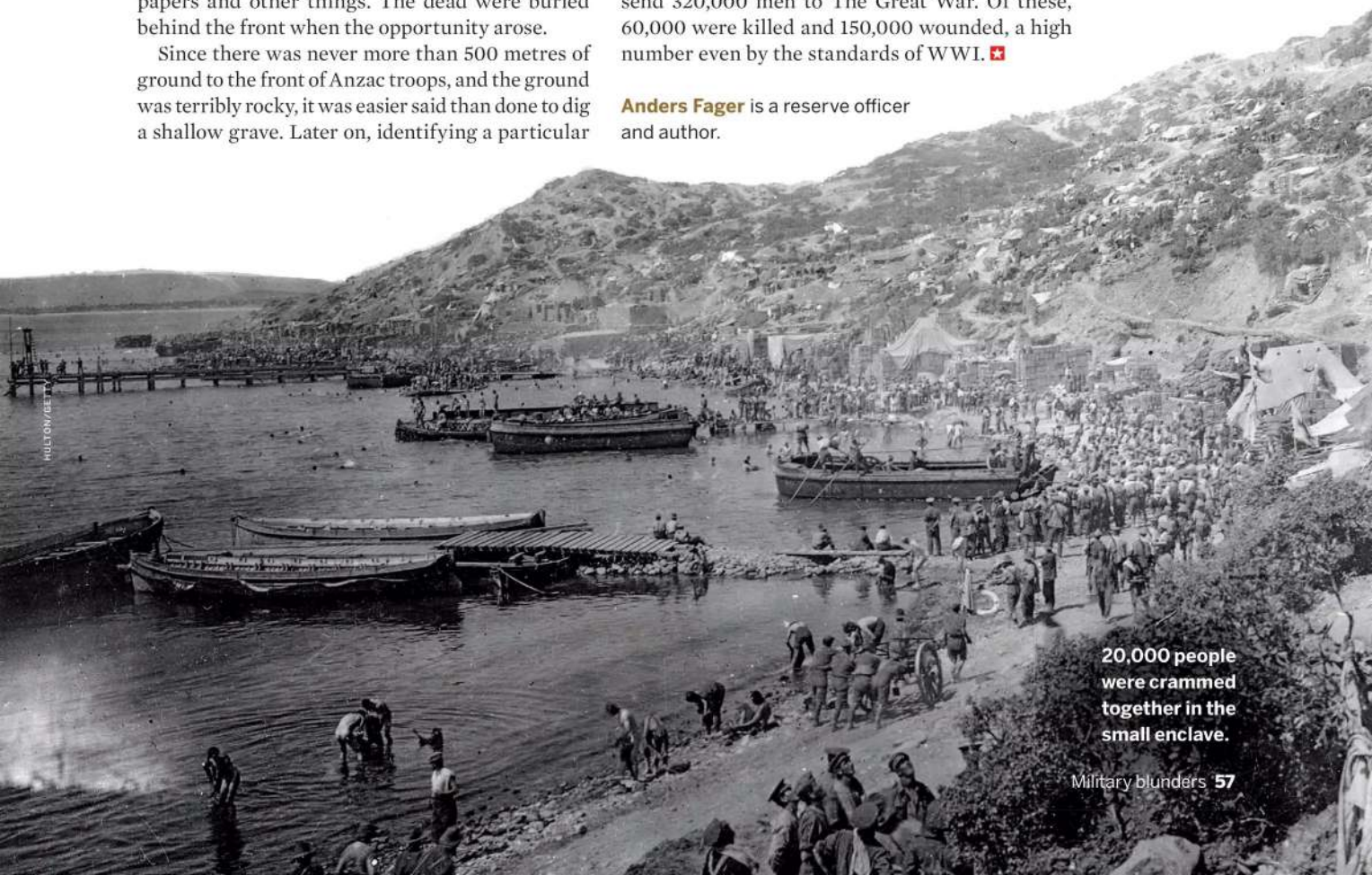
Australia never imposed conscription but would send 320,000 men to The Great War. Of these, 60,000 were killed and 150,000 wounded, a high number even by the standards of WWI. 🇺🇸

**Anders Fager** is a reserve officer and author.

### Further reading:

★ **Gallipoli (2003)** by L.A. Carlyon ★  
**The Beauty and Sorrow (2011)**

by Peter Englund.  
**Suggested film:**  
**Gallipoli (1981)**  
directed by Peter Weir.



20,000 people were crammed together in the small enclave.



## The Zeebrugge Raid, 1918

# Daring attack

When Vice Admiral Keyes was given command of his own fleet, he immediately staged a bold attack. The operation against the Germans' submarine bases in Belgium was a major failure – but Keyes was honoured for his actions.

Text: **MARCO SMEDBERG**

**T**he naval war in the English Channel during World War I was fought with several different objectives in mind. The British were trying to prevent German submarines from using the Channel as a shortcut to the Atlantic. To do this, the Dover Barrage was created, consisting of mines and anti-submarine nets.

The larger German submarines operated mainly in the Atlantic. But smaller mine-laying, coastal submarines had their base at the inland city of Bruges, which was connected to the harbours at Zeebrugge and Ostend by navigable canals. From these two ports they targeted British shipping around the UK. Over time, the Germans expanded their Belgian

submarine base to increase their naval firepower and reinforced the coastal defences in the area. A German naval airbase was also built near Zeebrugge. From there, British ships could be attacked in the English Channel.

**British  
marines storm  
up the pier  
in the port of  
Zeebrugge.**

**IN THE SPRING** of 1918, the Germans were preparing a decisive offensive on the Western Front before extensive American forces completed their journey across the Atlantic. In the autumn of 1917, the Allies managed to avert the worst of the submarine threat in the Atlantic by gathering vessels in convoys, but there were concerns that this would cause enemy submarines to concentrate their efforts on shipping in the Channel instead. It was simply

**“A direct attack was thus  
the only option”**





# fails

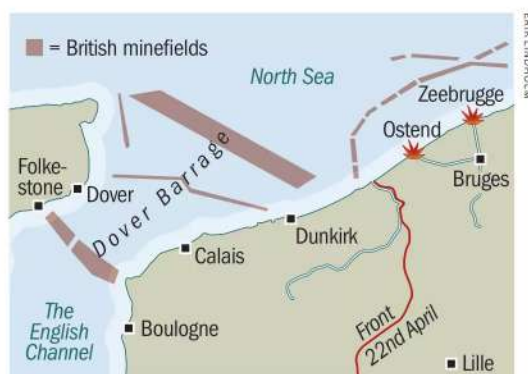
not possible to protect everything. On 1st January, 1918, the British naval forces in the straits of Dover received a dynamic new commander. Vice Admiral Roger Keyes immediately set about reinvigorating his somewhat tired forces.

The problem he inherited was that the Dover Barrage couldn't block all U-boat traffic. Worse, German submarines from the Belgian base were attacking British escort forces in the Channel. Keyes became convinced that the base had to be neutralised. Together with his staff, he developed a plan to block the inlets of the two canals that led from Zeebrugge and Ostend to the city of Bruges, where the base was located, thereby cutting off U-boat access to the Channel. They intended to enter the ports at night and sink five old cruisers, loaded with cement, as blockships. Success would also boost the flagging morale of the British forces.

The submarine base was well virtually immune to air strikes and fire from naval vessels. A direct ground attack was thus the only option. The Zeebrugge canal was protected by German guns on a large breakwater pier. The only way to take the pier was to storm it. To prevent German reinforcements from arriving, the main bridge would be blown using two submarines filled with explosives.

**THE CRUISER HMS *Vindictive*** was outfitted for the raid with howitzers, mortars, flame throwers, machine guns and foldaway ramps. The cruiser also towed two ferries across the English Channel. The troops on board consisted of 700 Royal Marines, armed with light machine guns and flame throwers. Everyone in the attack force was issued with extra hand grenades and life jackets. The marines also had their own comms and explosive specialists. The vessels also carried ladders that could be used to climb across to the pier. All in all, Keyes' attack force consisted of 1,780 men and 165 ships.

The plan also required the extensive use of smoke screens. In order to divert attention, other coastal routes had to be bombed in advance of the main attack. At the start of planning, Keyes had access to five divisions from the Royal Naval Air Service. This, however, was reduced to two when the RNAS was amalgamated into the newly formed Royal Air Force on 1st April. Keyes protested, but the newly created RAF had other priorities. It nevertheless provided him with good reconnaissance support and carried out decoy bombing raids prior to Keyes' assault. A shortage of chemicals for the smoke



**28 German submarines were sunk by mines off Dover, Ostend and Zeebrugge.**

bombs meant that they could not take advantage of the good weather in March. In April the force set out twice only to be recalled due to bad weather. The night of the 22nd April was finally chosen as the new date of the attack because of favourable tides. That meant it would take place on Saint George's Day.

The Germans had already found evidence of the attack plan on board a captured British ship during the first aborted assault. But they didn't believe the information they read, and failed to significantly increase alert levels along the coast.

**THE RAID ON Zeebrugge** started with British destroyers releasing smoke bombs to protect the attack force. But this was ineffective. Ten minutes before *Vindictive* and the two ferries reached their destination, they were discovered by the Germans, who opened fire. The last 200 metres of the approach saw significant losses on board *Vindictive*, including the attack's commanding officer and his deputy. Despite the cruiser accelerating, the strong tide caused it to stall 300 metres short of the breakwater. This meant that the German gun positions remained out of reach of the raiders, who were subjected to further shelling. It was also not possible to moor the ship as planned. One of the ferries therefore had to slow down and push *Vindictive* towards the pier during an hour of chaotic battle.

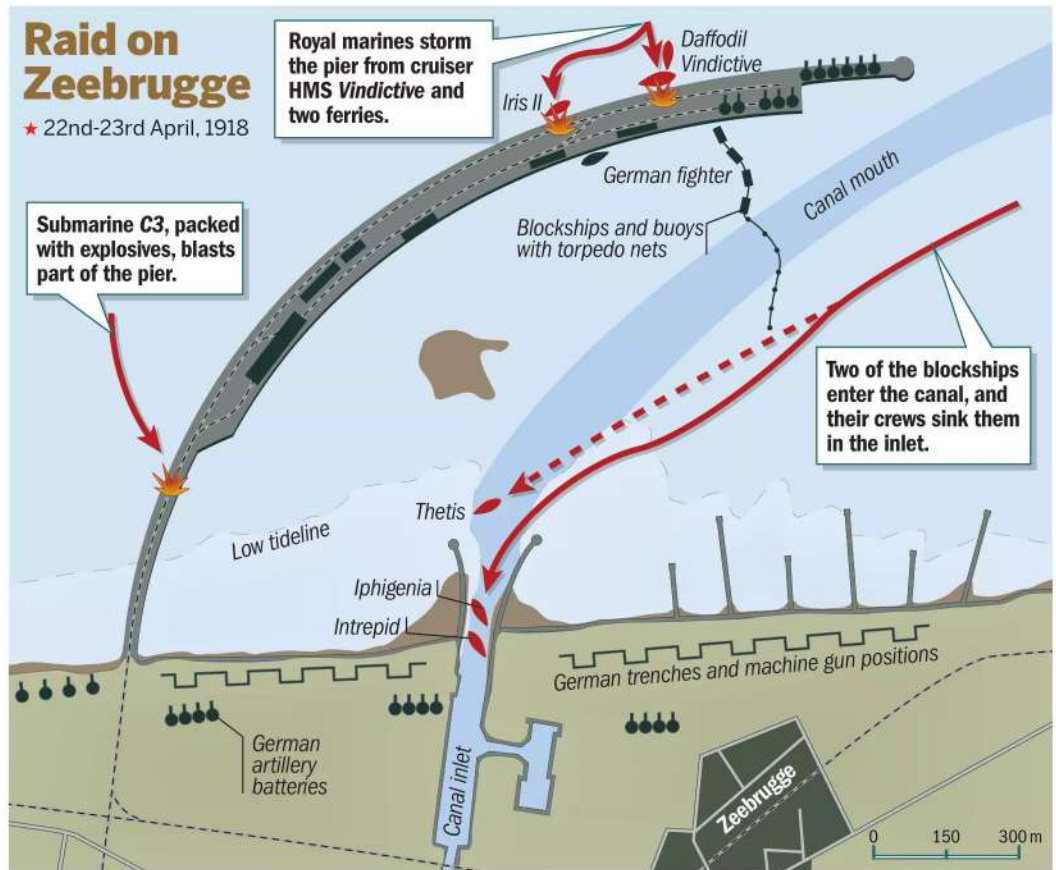
One of the two British submarines full of explosives did, however, manage to reach its destination. The crew lit the charges on board and then tried to get away in dinghies. They were ►



**Admiral Keyes.**



# ZEEBRUGGE 1918



► discovered as they rowed away and came under fire but were saved when the submarine exploded, destroying the 300-metre-long bridge out to the breakwater. The explosion also knocked out some German reinforcements.

**ON BOARD VINDICTIVE**, Marine Sergeant Harry Wright described the tense mood of the soldiers in the attack force. “There we stood, rifles in our hands ready for the dash forward; not a movement, hardly a whisper and only the noise of the propellers broke the silence... We were crowded together, shoulder to shoulder as thick as bees, when the silence was broken by a terrific bang followed by a crash as the fragments of shell fire fell amongst us, killing and maiming many as they stood to their arms... Our ranks got thinner every moment... The gangways, only two left out of the 14, were lowered on to the mole... I, as Platoon Sergeant, led 10 Platoon on shore... Our casualties were so great that out of a platoon of 45 only 12 of us landed.”

Marines from *Vindictive* managed to occupy the 1,800-metre-long and 80-metre-wide pier. From there, they tried to attack in the dark and confusion, despite German machine-gun fire. At the same time, three explosives barges were able to get very

close to the canal entrance before being discovered and fired on. The ship *Thetis* led. Although severely damaged, she managed to enter the canal, but sank before reaching her destination. The crew of the other two blockships managed to blow up their boats so that they sank in the right place. A German fighter plane also took part in the fighting inside the canal and was shot down by the British soldiers on the pier.

The soldiers on the ferry that had pushed *Vindictive* towards the quay had barely managed to clamber over the cruiser and on to the pier before they heard what some understood to be the signal to retreat. *Vindictive*’s siren had been knocked out, so another ship was used, but it blew the wrong signal: short and long blasts, rather than short blasts. In the resulting chaos, some soldiers were left on the pier. Sergeant Wright was one of them. “We were 200 yards from the ship when she left... We thought motorboats would be sent in to our assistance [and] waited, lying stiff and pretending to be dead... A machine-gun only 30 yards away was turned on us... For two hours we lay there and listened... Shells from our own ships were now striking the mole and we could hear them whistling overhead. The firing now eased down [and] the Germans came out no



11 men were awarded the Victoria Cross for the raid on Zeebrugge.



doubt to search the dead, when one man moved and then another... A German officer shouted in quite good English, 'The game's up, lads,' and seeing that we still hesitated he continued, 'Play the game and we will play the game with you. Lay down your arms and put your hands up and we will not harm you.' We obeyed this order and were made prisoners-of-war."

**OUTSIDE OSTEND, THE** attack was less dramatic, but a complete failure. The wind blew away the British smoke screen and exposed their marker buoys, which were immediately sunk by German fire. The Germans deliberately misled the attackers by moving their own buoys marking the port entrance. The result was that two blockships ended up over a kilometre from their planned positions and were sunk next to the port entrance.

Of the attack force, 170 men died, and 45 were taken as prisoners of war. The destroyer *North Star* and two sloops were also sunk outside Zeebrugge. Back home, Admiral Keyes welcomed the returning soldiers. He took care to say a few encouraging words to each of the 400 wounded. The attack was viewed as a boost to the British public's morale that was being tested by the German Spring Offensive on the Western Front. Keyes was showered with honours and 11 men in the assault force were awarded the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest honour for bravery.

Ultimately, however, the attack was a failure. After only a few days, the Germans managed to open a passage between the blockships in Zeebrugge for their smaller subs and ships. The canal system also meant the Germans could use alternative transport routes.

**ON THE NIGHT** of 10th-11th May, Keyes made another attempt to attack Ostend with the battered

**"After only a few days, the Germans managed to open a passage... for their smaller subs and ships"**

*Vindictive* and the old cruiser *Sappho*. The latter was intended to be sunk as a blockship, but engine damage meant *Sappho* was forced to turn back. Smoke and fog made it difficult for *Vindictive* to find the port entrance at all.

The remaining cruiser was subjected to intense gunfire, ran aground and was eventually blown up by the crew. But it did not block more than one-third of the port entrance. The small crew assigned to the mission was picked up by Keyes' flagship HMS *Warwick*, which in turn sailed into a mine and was damaged during its return to Dover.

Keyes proposed a third attack in June, but this was rejected by the Admiralty.

As far as the German submarine fleet was concerned, the base in Belgium had become less important. Admittedly, it continued to be useful while the British attacked shipping and Channel installations by air. But this was overshadowed by the fact that German submarines were incapable of taking out American troop transports.

In the spring of 1918, over 200,000 men sailed across the Atlantic each month, almost without resistance. Only 68 US soldiers lost their lives when U-boats sank three ships. In total, two million US soldiers were transported to Europe and they became crucial to outcome of the war. The German offensive on the Western front stalled, and by July, the Allies began to take the initiative. At that point the Belgian base ceased to be of any importance. 🇬🇧

**Marco Smedberg** is a military history writer.

**Further reading:**  
**A Naval History of World War I** (1994) by Paul Halpern  
**★ Lost Voices of the Royal Navy** (2005) by Max Arthur.

**British blockships in the entrance of the canal in Zeebrugge on 24th April, 1918.**








# PEARL HARBOR

## **TACTICAL TRIUMPH – STRATEGIC MISTAKE**

In December 1941, 353 Japanese naval aircraft succeeded in knocking out a large part of the US Pacific fleet in one of history's greatest surprise attacks. For Japan, however, the action was a disaster that brought the United States into the war and ended with nuclear bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Text: **JOHAN LUPANDER**





A Japanese pilot photographed the surprise attack on the fleet at Pearl Harbor on 7th December, 1941. In the foreground, a Nakajima B5N2 'Kate' torpedo bomber attacks.

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## PEARL HARBOR, 1941



CHRISTOPHER REIN

It was a peaceful afternoon on Sunday, 7th December, 1941. Large sections of the American public listened, as usual, to their favourite radio stations: sports broadcasts, church programmes and radio theatre.

Around 14.30 EST, the major stations all interrupted their regular programmes for an important announcement. A few minutes earlier, the Associated Press news agency had released a bulletin about a Japanese attack on the fleet at Pearl Harbor. The first to broadcast the story was the KGU station in Honolulu, which sent reports by telephone while the attack was in progress. A reporter shouted into the microphone: "It's no joke, it's a real war!" Millions of Americans responded with surprise, rage and, later on, determination.

**THE JAPANESE NAVAL** attack on the US base at Pearl Harbor is probably history's best example of a large-scale political and military ambush. Aside from instantly elevating the conflict in Europe and North Africa to a global war, the shocking experience influenced American military thinking for the next half century. But from a Japanese point of view, the attack was, in many ways, a failure that should never have been attempted.

In the mid-1800s, Japan was still a feudal, inward-looking and, by European standards, old-fashioned country. At the same time, its forced contact with the West – not least the demonstrations of the importance of modern fleets to maritime nations

for 'gunboat diplomacy' – had begun to make an impression. The resulting modernisation process was long-lasting and fundamental. The system of government was transformed and Japan became a modern, cohesive state. An industrial revolution took hold, and Japan's self-image as a superior and 'chosen' country was redefined. The constitution contained democratic elements with an elected parliament, but it also gave the military a controlling influence over the composition of the government.

Centuries-old Japanese thinking, which believed absolutely in its own people's cultural and racial superiority, particularly compared to the 'barbarous' Chinese and 'uncultivated, decadent' Westerners, was confirmed by its victories in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. Japan's disdainful attitude toward foreigners and their abilities to wage war explains, at least in part, the country's frequent misjudgements before and during World War II – including the attack on Pearl Harbor.

**BY 1931, JAPAN** had invaded Manchuria, an operation that six years later was extended to a war of conquest targeting the whole of China. The war was a growing burden on Japan's economy. The nation was also subject to widening sanctions, primarily put in place by the United States, on essential war commodities, such as scrap iron and petroleum products. As a result, in early 1941, Japan decided to conquer resource-rich Southeast Asia, whose European colonial rulers Britain, France and the Netherlands, had been weakened following the outbreak of war in 1939.

Perhaps the greatest concern for the Japanese was how the US would react. It was therefore decided from the outset that the US must be prevented from militarily opposing the planned expansion. In addition to the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese planned to conquer the Philippines (then a US colony) and occupy strategic

**"FROM A JAPANESE POINT OF VIEW, THE ATTACK WAS, IN MANY WAYS, A FAILURE"**



islands in the Pacific. The fact that Japan would provoke a war with an enemy whose industrial capacity was almost 13 times greater than its own was simply ignored. The *Kokutai* (national system of government) espoused a view of Western culture as decadent and “disinclined to make sacrifices for the sake of the nation”. They simply didn’t believe that the Americans would fight in response to an attack on one of their colonies.

**PEARL HARBOR** – which is on the south coast of Oahu, one of the islands that make up the Hawaiian archipelago – is a perfect natural harbour that can accommodate a large number of ships. Access from the ocean is through a relatively narrow inlet. In addition to the naval base, the island also housed army installations and a number of military airbases. It was protected from naval attacks by extensive coastal artillery, but its air defences were considerably weaker.

The anchorage at the naval base was relatively confined and just 15-20 metres deep. This posed a significant problem for Japan’s planners. Ideally, the attacking aircraft needed to drop a large number of torpedoes, the most accurate and effective weapon against heavily armoured battleships in a harbour. (British naval planes had used this exact tactic during their famous night attack on the Italian battleships in Taranto harbour a year earlier.) But the torpedoes dropped by Japanese aircraft (type 91s) tended to dive deeply after hitting the water and only stabilised at target depth after travelling ►



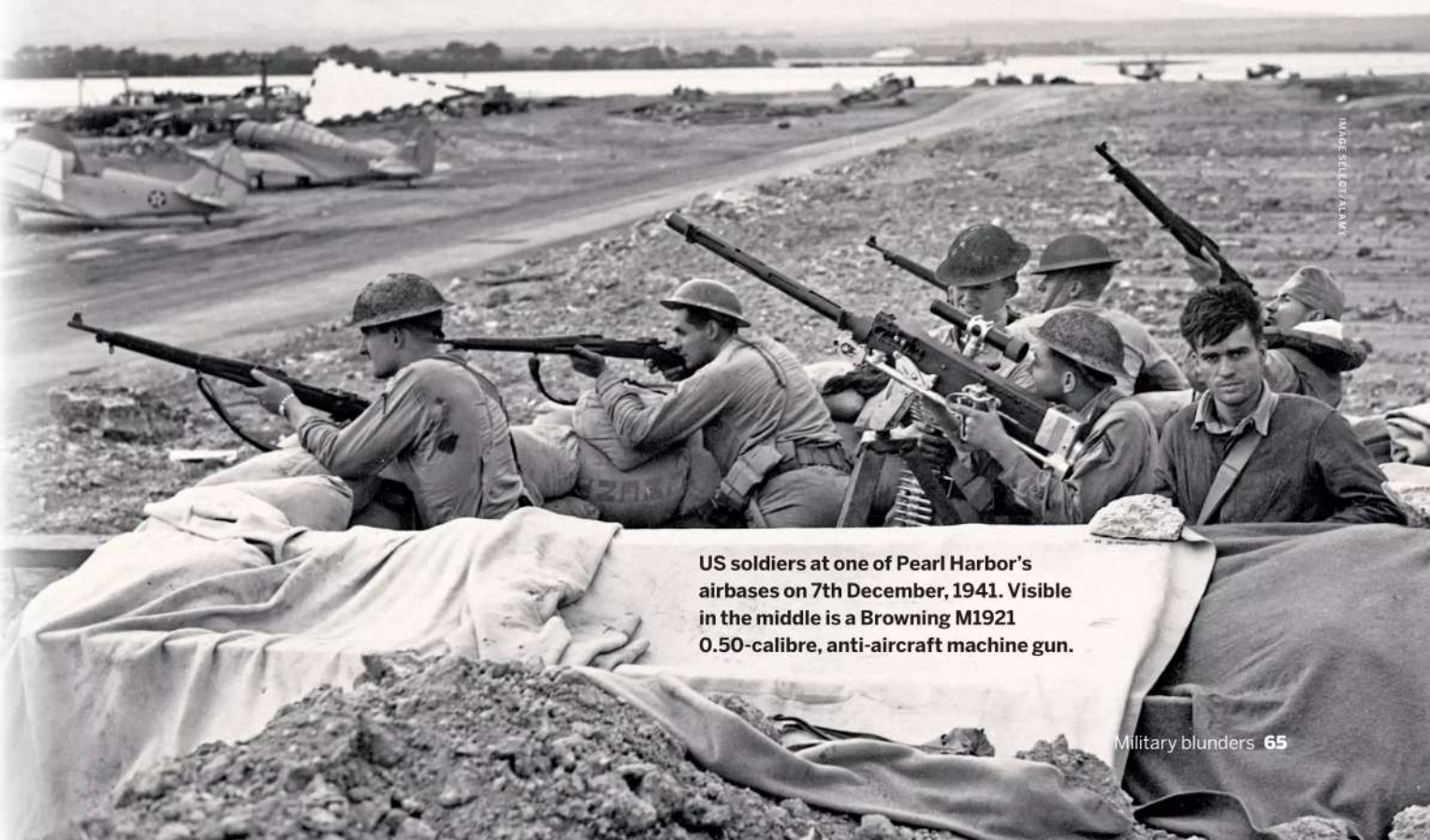
## A new stabilised torpedo

★ In order to slow down and stabilise the Type 91 torpedo during flight, the third model in the series, which was used at Pearl Harbor, was fitted with plywood stabiliser plates that were shed when the torpedo hit the water.

It also addressed another common problem for aerial torpedoes at the time: their tendency to rotate along their longitudinal axis while in the air. This meant that they were spinning when they hit the water’s surface,

which affected their bearing and depth in the water.

The problem was solved with an anti-rolling control system that detected any spin and moved aileron-like roll rudders into one of three positions – full-up, neutral or full-down – to counteract the motions. The roll rudders were covered with aerodynamic wooden wings in flight that were sheared off on impact, leaving small metal rudders for use under the water’s surface.



US soldiers at one of Pearl Harbor’s airbases on 7th December, 1941. Visible in the middle is a Browning M1921 0.50-calibre, anti-aircraft machine gun.



## PEARL HARBOR, 1941

► several hundred metres. If they were dropped on Pearl Harbor, most would likely end up with their noses buried in the sludge at the bottom of the channel. And if they did manage to level out, they would be at an unpredictable depth in the cramped harbour basin. The Japanese set about modifying the torpedoes to make them suitable for the mission.

Meanwhile, a young intelligence officer was dispatched to the Japanese consulate in Honolulu. Using his reports and other sources, a facsimile of the naval base and its surroundings was built in a large pond at the naval base at Harashijima. Ship

**Lieutenant Zenji Abe, shown here aboard the aircraft carrier *Akagi* flew an Aichi D3A 'Val' dive bomber during the attack.**

models, placed exactly according to their real-life counterparts, allowed the pilots to familiarise themselves with local landmarks that would help them navigate during the flight and prepare them for the attack itself.

All six of Japan's large aircraft carriers – the best in the world at the time – would be deployed in the attack. On 26th November, the fleet headed out of an isolated bay on Japan's northernmost coast. The plan was to sail across the North Pacific under radio silence and take up position at the starting point for the attack, north of Oahu, by the evening of the 7th December. The final orders for the squadron would be relayed by code – the attack was to take place only if explicit orders were given.

The slow tankers were left north of Oahu, while the aircraft carriers and their escorts continued south at maximum speed to reach the attack position before dawn. While it was still dark, two reconnaissance aircraft began their journey towards Pearl Harbor to provide the pilots with the most up-to-date information on conditions at the base.

**AT THIS TIME**, the US Army was conducting field trials with mobile radar detectors. They were also in the midst of establishing an Aircraft Warning Service, an organisation that could identify and monitor hostile aircraft at long range and relay relevant information to other branches of the military. To advance these efforts, a radar station had been installed at the northernmost tip of Oahu island, which army personnel switched on and evaluated every morning, between 04.00 and 07.00 local time.

On 7th December, the radar operators were in the process of closing down the station after its daily assessment when one of them noticed a strong echo coming from the north-northwest. Such a signal could only be caused by a large number of planes heading directly for Oahu. The operator immediately reported his observations to the air

**The Japanese flagship *Akagi* could carry around 70 aircraft.**



U.S. NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER PHOTOGRAPH



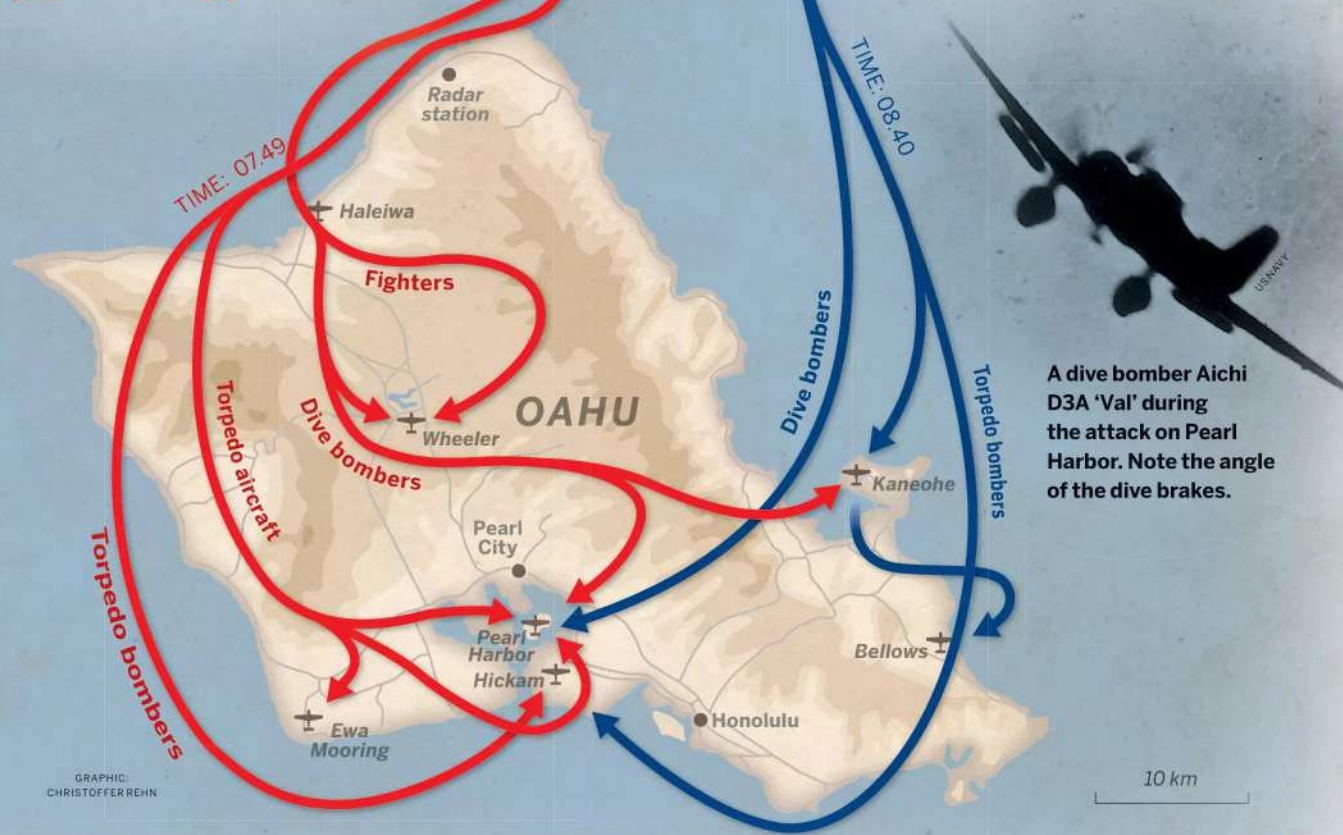
## First attack wave

Type	Number	Target
Fighters	40	Anti-aircraft, airfields
Dive bombers	53	Airfields
Torpedo bombers	50	Battleships
Torpedo aircraft	40	Battleships
<b>Total</b>	<b>183</b>	

**Total:  
353  
aircraft**

## Second attack wave

Type	Number	Target
Fighters	36	Anti-aircraft, airfields
Dive bombers	80	Airfields
Torpedo bombers	54	Airfields
<b>Total</b>	<b>170</b>	



defence centre, a brand-new installation that was still being set up and staffed.

Lieutenant Kermit Tyler, in his second day on the job, took the call. Despite the fact that the signal's heading didn't support the theory, the young lieutenant assumed that the radar was picking up a flight of B-17 bombers that was scheduled to arrive from the US West Coast. He told the operators not to worry about the signal and to continue shutting down the station.

**THIS EPISODE HAS** often been mistakenly portrayed as a missed opportunity to prepare the island for attack and launch fighters against the incoming enemy. The truth, however, is that it wouldn't have helped even if Tyler had interpreted the radar signal as a hostile air attack and tried to sound the alarm, because there was no functioning air-defence organisation trained to receive and

**“THEY SIMPLY DIDN'T BELIEVE THAT THE AMERICANS WOULD GO TO WAR IN RESPONSE”**

analyse such a report, let alone conclude that an attack was imminent and order suitable defensive action. To initiate such orders on the basis of a single observation from an experimental facility – which often received inexplicable echoes – would have taken base personnel hours as they attempted to locate a senior commander on a Sunday morning and then convince him to prepare for an attack.

The episode, therefore, is nothing more than a curio of history and in no way represents a 'missed ►





A motor boat picks up survivors from the burning, sinking battleship USS *West Virginia*.

► opportunity' to counter the attack. In any case, the fleet's senior command had already received warnings of a potential threat that morning:

- At 03.50, the coastal minesweeper USS *Condor* had made visual contact with the enemy near the harbour entrance.

- At 06.37, the destroyer USS *Ward* spotted a periscope tailing a US ship. It fired and sank what was later discovered to be a Japanese miniature submarine that was trying to enter the harbour.

The ships immediately reported both incidents to the command staff at the Hawaiian Fourteenth Naval District who didn't relay the messages or prompt any emergency response.

**THE JAPANESE AIRCRAFT** carriers' flight decks weren't big enough to allow all the planes to take off simultaneously, so the attack was carried out in two waves, with a 30-minute interval in-between.

The first wave, which comprised 183 aircraft, assembled south of its aircraft carrier in anticipation of the final assault order after air reconnaissance confirmed that the US fleet was at anchor as expected. Then they headed south in a dense formation, hidden from view above the clouds. The distance to the target was approximately 320

kilometres. At a pre-arranged time, the formation's navigator reduced altitude to get a visual check on their position.

The navigation of both the aircraft carriers and the airborne squadron had been perfect, and Oahu's coastline soon appeared in the haze, exactly as planned. On the far side of the coastal mountains, the weather was clear, and the flight reorganised itself into tactical groups to conduct the various attacks.

It was around 07.50 when the famous attack order was given: "Tora! Tora! Tora!"

The initial wave of attacks concentrated on the mission's primary targets: the battleships and airbases, aiming to put them out of action before a counterattack could be launched. A dozen aircraft armed with torpedoes attacked



Mitsuo Fuchida led the attacking air squadrons.

**"THE COST IN HUMAN LIFE WAS SHOCKING TO A COUNTRY THAT BELIEVED ITSELF INVULNERABLE"**



the moored battleships from the east, flying at the lowest possible altitude – 15 to 40 metres – without encountering resistance. The torpedo run was brief and devastatingly effective, with around 15 torpedo attacks being unleashed on the line of vessels in “Battleship Row”.

At the same time, bombs began to fall on the ships, as well as on five of Oahu’s airbases. Mitsubishi A6M ‘Zero’ fighters descended to their lowest altitude and began firing on the neat rows of parked aircraft.

Less than 30 minutes later, the first attack was over. The second wave followed, but the conditions were significantly worse for its pilots. The US air force had finally mobilised, and the smoke from fires and explosions shrouded the landmarks.

**THE BATTLESHIP USS *Arizona*** was hit at 08.06 by an 805-kilogramme armour-piercing bomb that ripped through the armoured decks – 17-18 centimetres of armour, distributed over three decks – and detonated inside the starboard ammunition magazine. The resulting fire spread, causing one of the *Arizona*’s forward ammunition stores to explode. The ship’s hull cracked, and an inferno raged from bow to stern before the ship slowly sank. A total of 1,177 people died, most of whom are still interred at the famous US war memorial that floats in the harbour above the ship’s wreckage.

The harbour contained eight battleships, one of which lay in a dry dock. All were modernised versions of models commissioned for World War I and were highly vulnerable to attack by bombs and especially torpedoes (see the table on the next page).

During the planning, Japan’s commanders had envisaged that most of the aircraft attacks would be used to target the infrastructure and planes at the US airbases, rather than the ships. But on the day, many Japanese pilots felt that the ships offered better targets than the airfields, which were already ablaze. As a result, they directed their attacks at large battleships, such as the USS *Nevada*. Unfortunately for Japan, the pilots failed to take into account the fact that they were armed with explosive bombs intended for ‘soft’ targets, not armour-piercing ones that could penetrate a battleship’s solidly built decks. Nonetheless, their bombing runs damaged and sank other vessels that were lost alongside the battleships that day.

The US lost 188 aircraft in the attack, most of which were destroyed while still on the ground. An additional 159 aircraft were damaged. In a few hours, 86 percent of its planes were put out of action and the Oahu squadrons were effectively grounded.

The cost in human life was shocking to a country that had, until then, believed itself invulnerable to



The Nakajima B5N2 type 97 ‘Kate’ torpedo bomber was the best aircraft of its kind in the world.

## Japan had the smartest weapons

★ At the start of World War II, Britain, the US and Japan all possessed around the same number of aircraft carriers. In terms of quality, however, the Japanese aircraft carrier was in a class of its own. With well-rehearsed, standardised procedures, it was accustomed to operating in large groups and employed hand-picked, well-trained pilots, excellent aircraft and versatile, potent weapons.

The Japanese Navy had been developing planes specifically for aircraft carriers since the 1920s and by 1941, it was already on its second generation, including:

- The Mitsubishi A6M ‘Zero’ fighter jet.
- The Aichi D3A1 type 99 ‘Val’ dive bomber.
- The Nakajima B5N2 type 97 ‘Kate’ torpedo bomber.

The ‘Zero’ and the ‘Kate’ were arguably the two best aircraft carrier-based aircraft in the world at this time. The ‘Val’ was somewhat older, with a fixed undercarriage and moderate cruising speed,

bomb load and range. In the right hands, however, it was unmatched as a dive bomber with its strike rate known to reach as high as 80 percent in some encounters.

No fighters were better armed than Japan’s, but its aircraft were also well-equipped in other respects:

The ‘Zero’ had automatic cannons and machine guns that could also be used against ‘soft’ targets on the ground.

The ‘Val’ could carry a 250-kg armour-piercing or explosive bomb. The former was used against heavily armoured ships, while the latter was for unarmoured ships or land facilities.

The ‘Kate’ carried a single type 91 torpedo, but could also be used to deliver a 805-kg bomb. The latter came in two versions: armour-piercing for use against heavily armoured vessels and explosive for onshore attacks.

At the time, the US Navy had no armour-piercing bombs and only one unreliable aerial torpedo model.



Mitsubishi A6M ‘Zero’, fighter jet.



Aichi D3A1 ‘Val’ dive bomber.



Nakajima B5N2 ‘Kate’ torpedo bomber.

Article continues on page 72 ►



PEARL HARBOR, 1941

# ATTACK ON THE BASE

This photo of Pearl Harbor was taken just over a month before the attack. The positions where the US ships were moored when the bombs began to fall are marked. 18 ships were hit in total, eight of which were battleships.

■ Ship sunk ■ Heavy damage ■ Light damage ■ Unscathed



A Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress was cut in half at Hickam Air Base.

The USS *West Virginia*, USS *Tennessee* and USS *Arizona* were among the battleships hit. The latter is seen here sinking after an explosion. The wreckage remains today as a war grave and memorial.



HICKAM FIELD

Oklahoma  
West Virginia  
Vestal  
Nevada  
Arizona





The USS *California* sinks after being hit by two bombs and two torpedoes.



A hangar burns behind the remains of a PBY Catalina reconnaissance aircraft.



## Battleships hit during the attack

Ship	Bomb strikes	Torpedo strikes	Result	Fate
■ <b>Arizona</b>	8	1	Exploded and sank.	Became a famous US war grave and memorial.
■ <b>Oklahoma</b>	-	5	Overturned and sank.	Salvaged, but sank on its way to being scrapped.
■ <b>West Virginia</b>	2	6	Sank on an even keel.	Salvaged and modernised. Returned to service in 1944.
■ <b>California</b>	2	2	Sank on an even keel.	Salvaged and modernised. Returned to service in 1944.
■ <b>Nevada</b>	5	1	Heavy damage, ran aground	Repaired and modernised. Returned to service in 1943.
■ <b>Maryland</b>	2	-	Minor damage.	Repaired. Back in service 1942.
■ <b>Pennsylvania</b>	1	-	Minor damage.	Repaired. Back in service 1942. Modernised in 1943.
■ <b>Tennessee</b>	2	-	Minor damage.	Repaired. Back in service 1942. Modernised in 1943.





## PEARL HARBOR, 1941

Shocked Navy personnel at Ford Island's naval base during the attack on Pearl Harbor. In the background, the destroyer USS Shaw explodes.

PICTORIAL PARADE/ARCHIVE/GETTY



► such attacks. It had always trusted that the barriers of the world's oceans would keep it safe. Now, a total of 2,402 people had died in a US territory, 57 of whom were civilians. The latter were hit hard by the unexploded anti-aircraft shells and shrapnel that rained down on the residential areas of Honolulu.

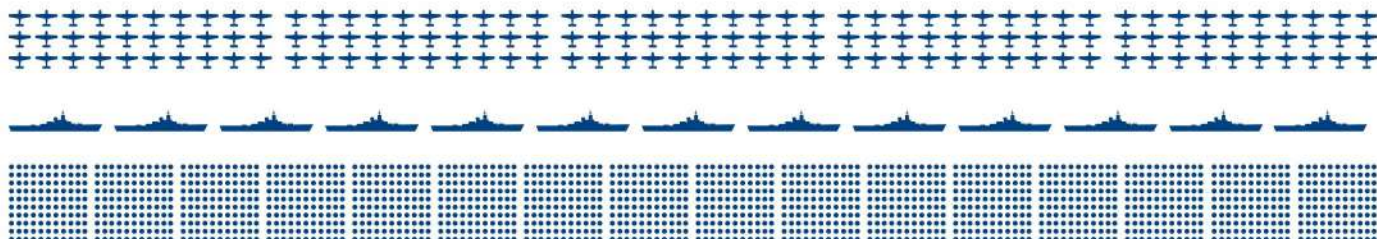
The scale and intensity of the Japanese attack remained unsurpassed anywhere in the world for many years.

Around 09.30, the planes in the first attack wave began landing on their respective aircraft carriers. Around an hour later, the second wave followed. The commander of the navy's air service, Captain

Mitsuo Fuchida, was among the last to land. He had remained in the air to gauge the full extent of the damage. Reporting to the fleet's commander-in-chief, Vice Admiral Chūichi Nagumo, Fuchida recommended a new and immediate attack. There were still many valuable targets – such as fuel depots and repair facilities – left to attack. However, Nagumo was reluctant: a new attack would take several hours to organise and carry out, and the Japanese aircraft carriers would be vulnerable to Hawaiian-based bombers for the entire duration.

The admiral was also aware that there were two US aircraft carriers patrolling the area who might

### US losses





## Five mini subs joined the attack

★ The Japanese had a penchant for weapons where the chances for survival were slim. One example was the Type A *Ko-hyoteki* mini subs, five of which were deployed at Pearl Harbor for the attack.

One, known as *Number 19*, was captured with its pilot,

Kazuo Sakamaki, when it ran aground on the east side of the island. Sakamaki had the dubious honour of being the first Japanese prisoner of war. Shamed, the Japanese struck his name from the records.

Recent evidence suggests that another, *Number 16*, may

have succeeded in its mission and been scuttled before its crew returned to the fleet – although, for now, official records still claim that all but one of the ten men assigned to the subs were lost along with their vessels.



A mini sub found on the beach after the attack.

arrive and launch their own attacks at any time. Losses and injuries following the attack had also reduced Nagumo's combat-ready aircraft strength by around 30 percent. As a result, any new attack would be less potent and further reduce effective air power – temporarily weakening his defence if he were to be attacked. Nagumo therefore decided to sail the fleet north, away from Hawaii. It was probably one of the most difficult decisions made during the war.

**JAPANESE LOSSES AT** Pearl Harbor amounted to 55 airmen and 29 aircraft – just eight percent of the total number deployed. In addition, all five miniature submarines were lost, along with nine out of ten of their crew members.

For the US, however, the losses were catastrophic. The attack sank four battleships and damaged three more. It also left over 300 US aircraft damaged or destroyed, and devastated the airbases. During the next few days, the Japanese also attacked British and US military installations in the Far East. No-one was surprised, therefore, when US President Franklin D Roosevelt addressed a unified congress on 8th December, 1941, to declare that a state of war now existed between the United States and Japan.

Three days later, Adolf Hitler followed suit with a German declaration of war against the United States

## “FOR THE UNITED STATES, HOWEVER, THE LOSSES WERE CATASTROPHIC”

– a decision that modern historians consider as wholly irrational. The war that until then had been confined to Europe and North Africa had, in the blink of an eye, engulfed the entire world.

**IF US LOSSES** seemed overwhelming at the time, the military consequences of the attack on the course of the war were surprisingly few.

First, Japan's original principal targets – two US aircraft carriers – were at sea when the attack took place and were, therefore, completely unaffected.

Second, the battleships that were sunk – like the rest of the US fleet – had never been a credible threat to Japanese operations on the far side of the Pacific. A lack of local fuel supplies, repair resources and air support made such an operation untenable.

Third, most of the aircraft targeted in the raid weren't designed for long-range operations and ▶



Franklin D Roosevelt, US president 1933–45.

188 aircraft

18 ships (16 of which were salvaged)

2,402 dead  
(1,282 wounded)

### Japan's losses

29 aircraft

5 mini subs

64 dead



## PEARL HARBOR, 1941

► were therefore unsuitable to be quickly deployed to defend a distant colony, such as the Philippines.

Fourth, the Japanese left all of Pearl Harbor's essential resources, such as dry docks, workshops and fuel depots intact. If these had been destroyed, the US Pacific fleet, along with its aircraft carriers, would have had to retreat to the US West Coast until the base had been rebuilt. This would have had serious consequences for the ensuing war in the Pacific. The Japanese

offensive could have expanded further east and south-east, which would have prolonged the war.

Fifth, the anchorage at Pearl Harbor is relatively shallow. This made it easier to salvage the targeted battleships. Only the USS *Arizona* and USS *Utah* were beyond salvaging following the attack. The USS *Oklahoma* was raised, but later deemed to be too old to be worth restoring. Once the other five had been raised, refitted and modernised, they returned to active duty, and helped in bombarding shore defences later in the conflict. They even made

The destroyers USS *Downes* and USS *Cassin* were heavily damaged while in dry dock, but both were rebuilt. Behind them is the partially damaged battleship USS *Pennsylvania*

**"THE ATTACK  
WAS AN ICONIC  
EVENT"**



it to the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944, the largest naval battle of World War II.

For Japan, the attack on Pearl Harbor was a limited tactical success. Strategically, however, it was a total disaster that culminated in mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Hitler had been as surprised by Pearl Harbor as the Americans, which may have influenced his seemingly impulsive declaration of war against the US a few days later. If Hitler had refrained from such a declaration, the war might have swung in Germany's favour. Japan's insistence on keeping the attack on Pearl Harbor secret, meant that it could not be incorporated into a wider Axis strategy that might have kept the US out of the war for longer.

**HISTORICAL SPECULATION IS**, by nature, a guessing game, but even if the US had joined the war later, its huge manufacturing capacity would still have given the Allies the edge in the long run. A Japanese war of conquest in the Far East without an initial attack on Pearl Harbor or any threat to US colonial interests would have been a different proposition, however. The American people had a strong desire to remain neutral at the time. Would its politicians really have gone against public sentiment and entered a war to defend British, French and Dutch colonies? US reluctance at that point could very well have served Japan better than a pre-emptive strike on the US Pacific fleet.

In the end, the attack simply prompted US anger and a desire for vengeance, a sentiment perhaps best illustrated by Admiral Halsey's famous remark on seeing the devastation at Pearl Harbor: "Before we're through with them, the Japanese language will be spoken only in hell!"

In the American psyche, the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was an iconic event on a par with the Battles of Yorktown and Gettysburg, and more recently, the 9/11 Attacks. The trauma of the attack affected US military policy for the next 50 years and influenced its actions throughout the Cold-War era. It engendered an almost-paranoid fear of being taken by surprise, which led successive administrations to exaggerate the Soviet threat and install hugely expensive defensive measures.

As discussed at the outset, the attack on Pearl Harbor is perhaps the quintessential example of a successful surprise attack. The fact that it ultimately led to the destruction of everything that its perpetrators held dear elevates it to a level of tragedy usually reserved for Greek dramatists. 🇺🇸

**Johan Lupander** is a military historian.

**Further reading:** *Day of Infamy* (2001) by Walter Lord • *At Dawn we Slept* (1981) by Gordon Prange.



## The warning came too late

★ In the 1920s and 30s, Japan, like many other countries, used rotor-type encryption machines to protect top-secret messages. What they couldn't know was that in the early 1940s, the US and Great Britain had managed to develop machines that could decipher such encrypted messages. Thus, the US was able to read every communiqué sent to the Japanese embassy in Washington DC.

In autumn 1941, talks were held between Japan and the US about the latter's ongoing embargo on scrap iron and petroleum products – goods crucial for Japan's war with China. The Japanese Foreign Ministry in Tokyo sent constant communiqués to Washington, all of which were intercepted, deciphered and handed to the US negotiators before each session.

When the talks collapsed at the end of November, Japan decided to go to war. The government wanted to launch its first attack within an hour of serving notice that the negotiations were at an end. The Japanese ambassador's instructions were therefore very specific: he must serve the notice at exactly at 13.00 EST on Sunday, 7th December.

The communiqué immediately set alarm bells

ringing. Intelligence chiefs recognised at once that the prescribed time equated to dawn in Hawaii – a classic time for surprise attacks. They began trying to track down the senior army and navy personnel responsible for operational control in the region because they were the only ones who could order the commanders in Hawaii to put the Oahu base on full alert. But this was Sunday morning and tracking down senior military staff

was no easy matter – one commander that they needed to contact was out riding his horse, for example.

With the key people finally informed, it took yet more time to make the necessary decisions, draft telegrams warning of the danger and ensure they were transmitted.

When the telegrams finally arrived at the civilian telegram office in Honolulu – just 37 minutes before the attack began – staff there discovered that the newly installed connection to the military base had been disconnected for repair. The telegrams were held up for another hour while the staff pondered what to do. Eventually, the telegram was transferred by a office runner by bicycle. He arrived at the base in the middle of the final phase of the attack.



**Japanese encryption machine.**


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The commander-in-chief of the British forces in Singapore, Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival (far right) on his way to surrender.

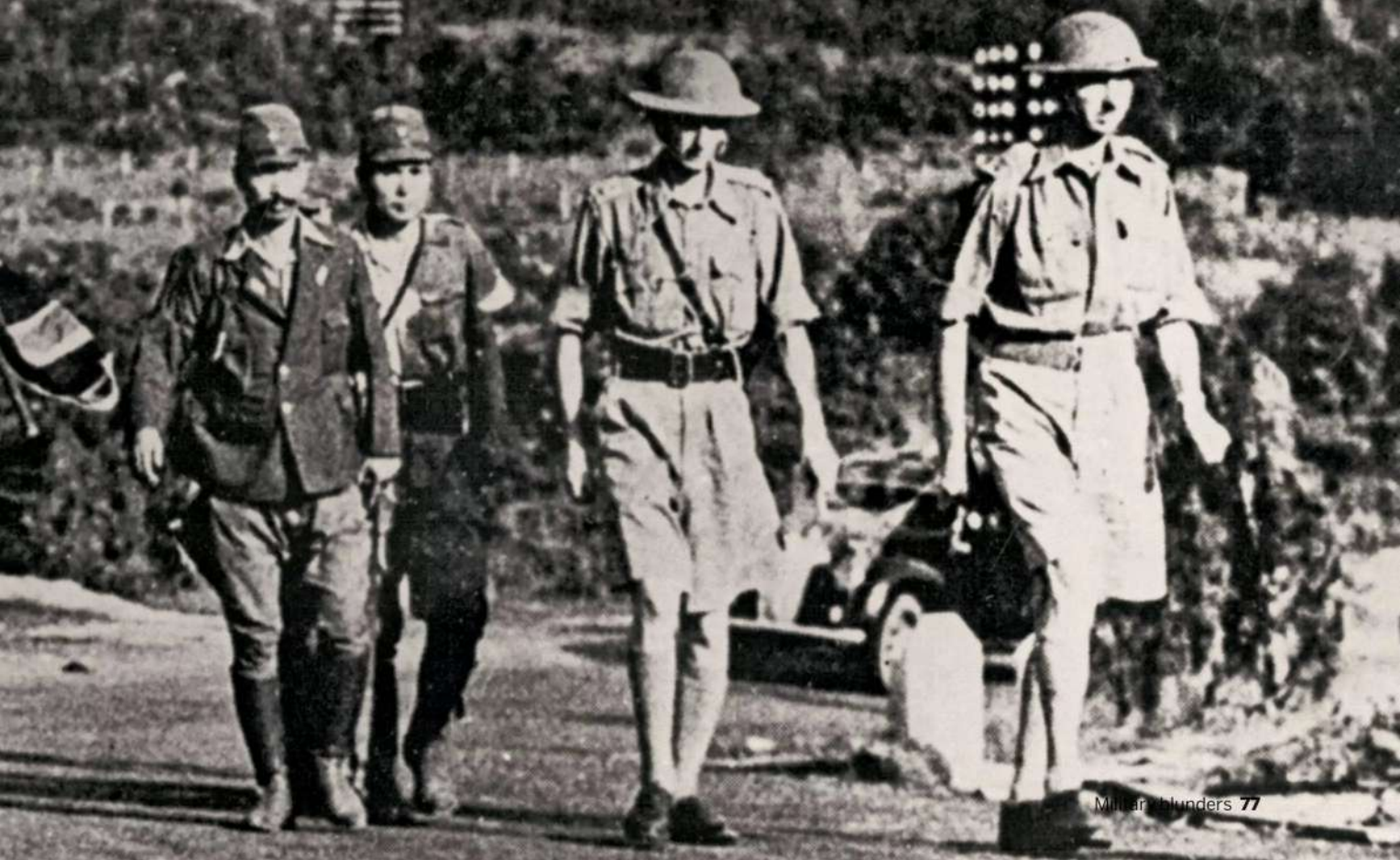


SINGAPORE'S FALL, 1942

# THE WORST DEFEAT

Churchill called the surrender of Singapore “the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history”. How could a force of over 100,000 well-equipped British capitulate to three exhausted Japanese divisions? The explanation lies in inadequate intelligence and poor coordination.

Text: JOHAN VON HORN





## SINGAPORE'S FALL, 1942

“

Is the British Army going to surrender or not? Answer YES or NO.” General Tomoyuki Yamashita banged the table with his fist and directed his gaze at Lieutenant-General Arthur

Percival across the table.

The unconditional surrender of Singapore on the evening of 15th February, 1942 played a decisive role in the dismantling of the British Empire. 130,000 well-equipped British soldiers found themselves submitting to three exhausted Japanese infantry divisions who, furthermore, had little ammunition left.

The Japanese had advanced 1,100 kilometres – the equivalent of travelling by road from Paris to Berlin – in 55 days, fought 95 battles and repaired more than 250 bridges. How had it been possible?

**JAPAN'S DEPENDENCE ON** raw materials from China, the Malay Peninsula and the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) increased in the 1930s. This created conflicts of interest with the great powers of the time. Japan became increasingly isolated after it invaded Manchuria, and the brutal war led to several international protests, which the country ignored.

The United States applied economic sanctions, with Britain and the Netherlands following suit. This halted oil deliveries from the Dutch East Indies. Japan was completely dependent on imported oil, and its economic planning commission concluded it wouldn't be possible to secure Japan's oil requirements by peaceful means.

Its expansion north of China clashed with Soviet interests and was eventually halted by the Red Army at the Battle of Khalkhin Gol in 1939. Japan was forced to turn its attentions south, and Western politicians finally realised – with some reluctance – that action was necessary. On 14th February, 1938 His Majesty's Naval Base (HMNB), Singapore was formally opened, and in Tokyo it was claimed that a sword had been pointed at the

## “THIS HALTED OIL DELIVERIES FROM THE DUTCH EAST INDIES”

heart of the Japanese empire. Until 1940, Japanese war planning focused on war with the Soviet Union. The Imperial Japanese Army in 1940 consisted of 376,000 men in 31 infantry divisions. This horse-drawn force moved primarily on foot and lacked both experience and equipment for jungle warfare. In contrast, the Japanese navy was modern and powerful, supported by a well-developed and competent fleet of aircraft carrier-based planes. This would be their most potent weapon during the first months of the Pacific War.

The Japanese air force was part of the army, its main task being to provide close air support for ground forces. Air force officers had started out as army cadets, gaining a good understanding of the principles and demands of ground combat. This knowledge would prove to be decisive during the campaign on the Malayan peninsula.

Japan tried to break the political stalemate through negotiation, but at the same time embarked on preparations for war. A conquest of the Malay Peninsula and Dutch East Indies was considered the best route to securing Japanese interests, an operation that was estimated to require 15 divisions and one year to complete. The Navy's supreme commander, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, was strongly opposed to war. He'd been a naval attaché in Washington, recognised the US's industrial strength and believed Japan could only resist the US and British fleets for six months before the inevitable growth in Allied forces made the future uncertain.

**IN JANUARY 1941**, ten general staff officers were given nine months to produce tactical and equipment proposals for jungle warfare along with



## The “Tiger of Malaya”

★ Japanese 25th Army commander, General Tomoyuki Yamashita, visited Germany in 1941. There he was trained in the fast and mobile warfare that he used to great effect against the

British. After Singapore's fall, he was hailed in Japan as the “Tiger of Malaya”. He himself said the attack had been “a bluff that worked”. After the war, Yamashita was convicted and executed

for war crimes. He explained his decision – as an officer – to surrender rather than commit suicide because, “If I kill myself someone else will have to take the blame.”





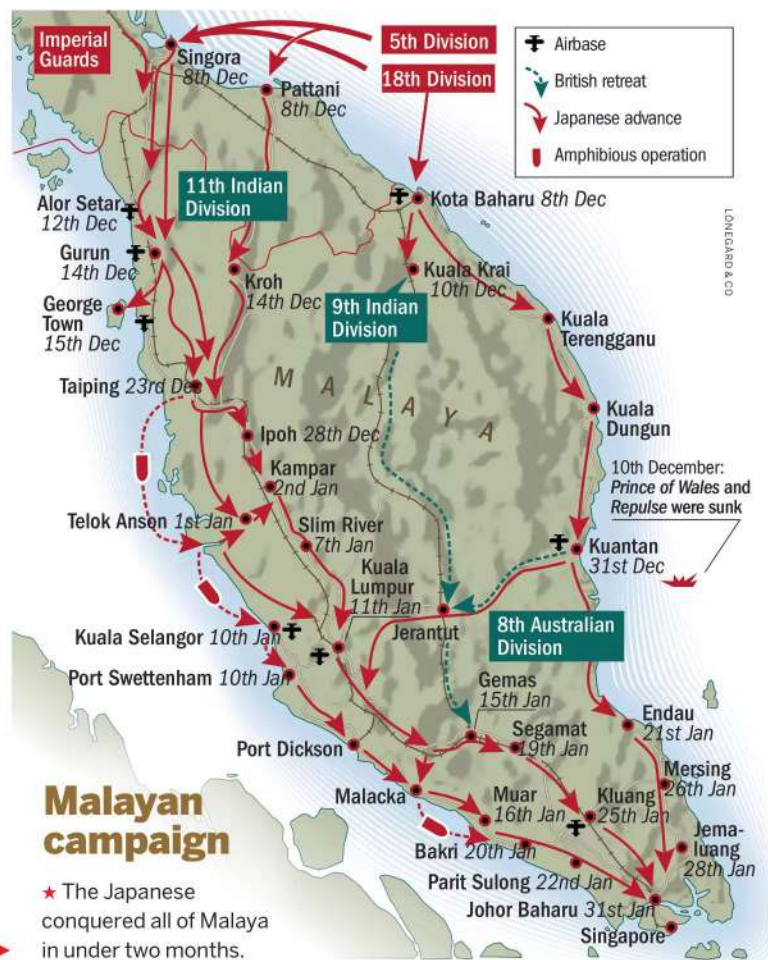
Japanese soldiers often had to repair or build new bridges after the British destroyed them during their retreat through the jungle.

operational plans to conquer the Malay Peninsula, Dutch East India and Burma. The specific study of the Malay Peninsula and Singapore fell to one Lieutenant Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, who would later become head of operations and planning for the 25th Army.

Personal expeditions coupled with conversations with men conducting business in the proposed area of operations provided a clear picture of the difficulties and opportunities. Tsuji concluded the best option was to capture Singapore from the north, landing south of Thailand before advancing further south through Malaya's excellent road network. The Japanese anticipated they could quickly take airbases north of Malaya and then send in flights from French Indochina to guarantee air support during the advance on Singapore.

After negotiations with Vichy France, the Japanese gained access to several favourable airbases and ports. In February 1941, a small contingent of troops sailed from Taiwan wearing uniforms and equipment deemed suitable for tropical warfare, landing in the Gulf of Kagoshima on the island of Kyushu. The exercise aimed to define some of the fundamental principles for invading along open coast.

**IN JUNE 1941**, a larger group – including an infantry battalion – took part in a larger amphibious landing on Hainan Island off the southern tip of China. After landing, troops advanced across the island performing exercises involving combat, air-support coordination and the rapid destruction ▶





# SINGAPORE'S FALL, 1942



The battleship *Repulse* at the bottom of the image is hit by a Japanese bomb. At the top is the battleship *Prince of Wales*.



The conquest of Malaya relied on the Japanese capturing British airbases. Control of these airfields enabled the Japanese air forces to later make great progress against the British.

- ▶ and building of bridges. Problems with the horses during the sea transport phase that meant those troops intended for Malaya were reorganised into mixed formations using bicycles while trucks would be tasked with deploying heavier equipment thanks to the region's well-paved asphalt roads.

British intelligence knew there was a network of agents among Japanese businessmen on the Malay Peninsula. But they refused to intervene, because officially they did not want to provoke the Japanese. The press attaché at the Singapore Embassy guided civilian-clad Japanese officers around British bases.

British officer Captain Patrick Heenan headed the Japanese agent network in Malaya. He was disliked by his fellow officers and was transferred to an Indian Army air liaison unit. There he became an intelligence officer with access to all the material he needed. The Japanese air force's incredible ability to target the right areas at the right time was considered by many to be down to Heenan. Although he'd been suspected before the outbreak of war, no moves were made until he was arrested on 10th December, 1941. He was officially tried and executed, but rumours persist that he was summarily shot by military police in the port area of Singapore.

**THE JAPANESE BECAME** aware of correspondence between the war cabinet in London and the top military commanders in Singapore regarding the defence plans for the Malay Peninsula. Documents had been sent on the ship *MV Automedon*, which in

September 1940 was stopped in the Indian Ocean by the German cruiser *Atlantis*, which had disguised herself as a Dutch merchant vessel. *Automedon* was unable to send a warning report, and in 1941 the British remained unaware that the Japanese were reading their encrypted communications. As a token of Japan's gratitude, *Atlantis's* commander Captain Rögge received a samurai sword directly from the emperor.

**THE JAPANESE 25TH** Army assembled on the east coast of Indochina. The invasion of the Malay Peninsula was coordinated with the attack on Pearl Harbor, since neutralising the US Navy was a prerequisite for the war plan. The army comprised two large, carefully selected infantry divisions with combat experience to go alongside the Imperial Guards 2nd Infantry Division, which admittedly lacked battle readiness. There was also a tank brigade plus artillery and engineering regiments.

None of the men had experience in jungle warfare, as several British sources claimed, but they had received thorough training in advancing against resistance along roads, through mountainous terrain and in repairing bridges. In total, Japan deployed around 60,000 men. The invasion would be supported by the 3rd Air Force, based in French Indochina with over 450 modern aircraft. The air force would soon regroup at captured British airbases in northern Malaya. The force was shipped overseas on 28 merchant vessels protected by relatively small naval forces since the Japanese



were counting on the element of surprise. It's easy to lay the blame for the disaster in Singapore on the military leadership, but the British government laid the groundwork over a ten-year period. In 1919, the government published the Ten Year Rule, which stated "the British Empire would not be engaged in any great war during the next ten years". As Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1928, Winston Churchill persuaded the cabinet to make the rule self-perpetuating. As a result, money allocated for defending the Malay Peninsula was removed.

The British assumed that any threat to Singapore would come from the sea to the south and that the jungle of the Malay Peninsula would be impervious to major forces. Thus Malaya's defence was neglected, even though it was here – and not Singapore – where the region's raw materials could be found. It was believed Singapore could hold out until reinforcements arrived from Europe. A powerful artillery defence was built on the sea front with five 380-mm, six 240-mm and 18 152-mm batteries all pointing out to sea. Most gun mounts could rotate 360 degrees and contrary to what is claimed in many histories, they could provide fire support to those fighting battles on the mainland north of Singapore.

On the other hand, the guns possessed no explosive shells with fuzes that could be deployed effectively in this way. Most ammunition consisted of capped armour-piercing shells that were effective against ship hulls but had limited impact on ground targets. The RAF had built some airbases in the north of Malaya, but these had been constructed without coordinating with other branches of the military.

**TWO MEN HAD** made a realistic threat assessment. Ironically, Lieutenant General Arthur Percival was one when he was chief of staff in 1937. The other was the Secretary of Defence in the colonial government, CA Vlieland. In

## “THE BRITISH ASSUMED THAT ANY THREAT TO SINGAPORE WOULD COME FROM THE SEA”

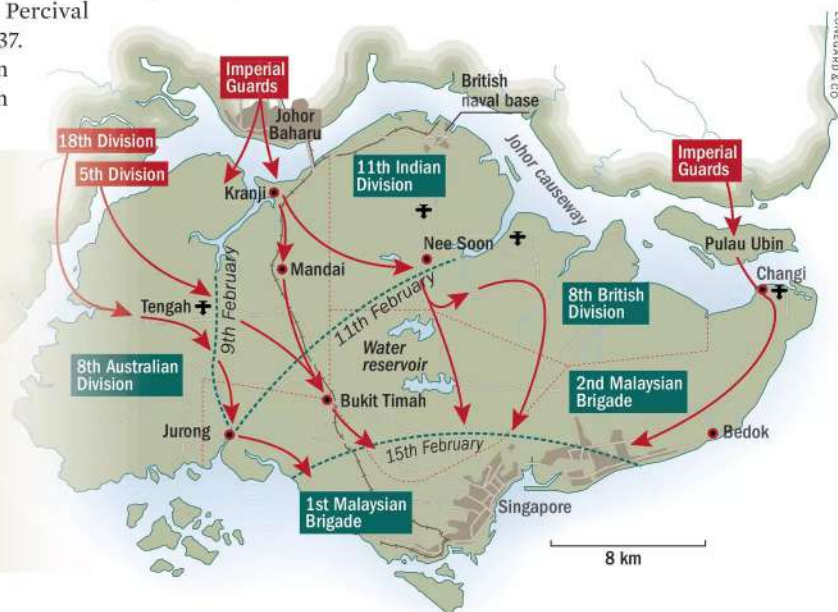
1938, Vlieland described in detail – and with great accuracy – the likely routes for advancing south on Singapore. He fell victim to political machinations when General Lionel Bond declared that “a bunch of damned civilians” couldn't understand what they were talking about. Vlieland returned to Britain in 1941, where he experienced the bittersweetness of having his prediction proved true.

By the summer of 1940, when the British realised that war could break out, the military wanted to extend the defence of Malaya and train for jungle warfare. The civil administration blocked the move – nothing must ruin the colony's commercial interests and comfortable lifestyle. Plantation owners opposed any exercises in the likely areas of battle, and so the troops had to train at their barracks, on airfields and to some degree near the roads. They never practiced encircling, flank or counterattacks in the jungle, which led to troop commanders and staff getting caught in a static mindset with disastrous consequences.

**GENERAL PERCIVAL WAS** in command of 15 brigades of British, Indian, Australian and Malay troops, totalling almost 150,000 men. They were well-equipped with vehicles, weapons and ammunition, but lacked both war and jungle experience, so were considered of limited combat ▶

### The attack on Singapore

★ On the night of 7th February, 1942, the Japanese Imperial Guard made a feint attack at Pulau Ubin, so the British would believe that was where the main attack would come. The following night, the 5th and 18th Divisions invaded and on 9th February the Imperial Guard crossed the Johore Strait at Kranji. On 15th February the British surrendered.





## SINGAPORE'S FALL, 1942

- ▶ value. They also possessed around 150 relatively outdated aircraft throughout Malaya and Singapore. Despite his previous assessments, Percival was a major contributor towards the inadequate preparations. After his chief engineer Brigadier Ivan Simson told him he had the resources to set up a range of barriers from anti-tank defences to fire traps, mines and floating barbed wire, Percival simply replied: "I believe that defences of the sort you want to throw up are bad for the morale of troops and civilians."

Churchill, always interested in detail, wrote in his memoirs that he first realised how poorly prepared Singapore was in January 1942. He then sent a personal message to the commander-in-chief that included a ten-point plan to improve Singapore's defences. The prime minister immersed himself in the organisation of machine guns and continuous fire systems, the design of fortifications and other technical details. It ended: "No surrender can be contemplated."

**THE BRITISH INTELLIGENCE** service's major weakness was its lack of a functioning agent network in Malaya and neighbouring countries, compounded by an inability to analyse and distribute intelligence. Two particular examples stand out:

- In mid-1941, the Japanese ordered 50,000 copies of a Japanese-Malay pocket dictionary and 1:100,000-scale field maps of Malaya with all-Japanese text from a Saigon printing press. This

order should have raised eyebrows, but the British remained ignorant of it.

- During a stopover in French Indochina on 4th December, 1941, a British pilot came across a heavily inebriated man in the airport cafeteria who turned out to be a Japanese flight technician. Believing he was talking to a Frenchman, the technician revealed details of the imminent operation planned for Malaya and Singapore. The incident was duly reported to British intelligence, but no alarm bells rang.

The most serious problem, however, was the non-existent coordination between civil and military departments when it came to planning for war. Poor personal relationships between key personnel led to a breakdown in communication. For example, feuding between members of the local defence committee meant information about Japanese movements wasn't shared.

On 8th December, 1941, the Japanese 5th Division landed on the east coast of the Malay Peninsula at Singora and Patani in southern Siam (modern-day Thailand) without meeting any resistance. In contrast, the 18th Division met fierce resistance when it landed at Kota Bahru. At the same time, both the naval base and aircraft bases in Singapore were bombed. Only 64 people died, but the attack struck a huge psychological blow.

**ON 10TH DECEMBER**, HMS *Prince of Wales* and HMS *Repulse* were sunk off the east coast of the Malay Peninsula. The fleet's commander,

**The Japanese light Type 95 Ha-Go tank was outdated. But it surprised the British who hadn't expected to encounter tanks in the jungle.**







The jungle battles were often fought at close quarters, making them very brutal. Painting by Japanese artist Kei Sato.

Admiral Sir Thomas Philips, had been promised air support from the Seletar base, but the fighters never received orders to take off thanks to the miserable communications between the different military branches, which characterised the entire fight for the Malay Peninsula. The Japanese navy's bombers were able to attack undisturbed, sinking the two battleships without them striking any kind of blow against the Japanese operation. The setback provoked a shocked reaction among the military leadership in Singapore, and a feeling began to spread that the game was up.

On 11th December, the Japanese crushed British defences at Jitra in northern Malaya. Two Indian battalions sent ahead to try and stall the attack were overrun, and the Japanese charged through gaps in the line to prompt a hurried withdrawal of British divisions and a collapse of the entire northern front. Now the British retreat began in earnest, and large quantities of equipment and vehicles were abandoned.

Japan now seized the initiative. Planes started systematically bombing airbases, allowing its troops to advance undisturbed along the roads while subjecting the retreating British troops to frequent attacks from the air. Over the course of 18 days, the British abandoned the northern parts of Malaya along with their airbases, which were quickly exploited by the Japanese. Hope now rested on a new defensive line at Kampar, from where the road network south could be controlled.

**THE BATTLE OF** Kampar lasted four days until 2nd January, 1942. Strongly reinforced and protected

British positions subjected the Japanese to heavy artillery fire, inflicting many casualties. Japanese forces were exhausted, and for the first time during the campaign, General Yamashita considered retreating to regroup his forces. But instead, it was the British who withdrew.

A battalion from the Japanese 4th Guards Regiment had bypassed British defences to land south-west of Kampar, threatening British communications. Unclear messages and errors in assessing the Japanese positions led the British to withdraw from their position at Kampar. Thus, opening the road to the Malayan capital of Kuala Lumpur.

On 7th January, the British tried to block the Japanese advance at the River Slim, losing two brigades along with large numbers of artillery, vehicles and ammunition. It was no longer possible to hold on to the central part of the Malay Peninsula, and the British retreated once again, this time to Johore (now Johor), north of Singapore.

**GENERAL YAMASHITA'S TACTICS** of outflanking British defences with small units had disproportionately significant effects on the ►

**“THE JAPANESE NAVY'S BOMBERS WERE ABLE TO ATTACK UNDISTURBED”**



# SINGAPORE'S FALL, 1942



- British decision-making cycle, the OODA (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) loop, influencing their early withdrawals.

The retreat to Johor sapped the defending forces. Unclear roles and poor choice of orders exacerbated an already difficult situation. On 31st January, the final British forces crossed the Johore Causeway linking the mainland to Singapore. The last man across was Lieutenant Colonel Ian Stewart, commander of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders 2nd Battalion. When he reached the southern end of the causeway and as the bagpipes sounded 'Blue Bonnets over the Border' into the morning air, engineers blew up the bridge. Britain had lost Malaya.

On 1st February, Singapore was in complete chaos, with around a million people trapped inside a six-kilometre radius. Refugees tried desperately to get away by ship from ports that were constantly bombed. Losses were very high – many families had let children take seats on vessels hoping to follow later. In many cases, they never saw their children again: more than 80 ships were sunk in just a few days.

**THE JAPANESE ATTEMPTED** to land two divisions to the west and north-west of the island of Singapore in the dark. Their targets were the Tengah aerodrome and water reservoirs at the heart of the island. The Imperial Guard would be deployed to the north-east to capture Changi before advancing on the Paya Lebar area inland. The attack would be supported by 440 artillery pieces around one kilometre north of the Johore Strait. Yamashita had set up his headquarters in the Sultan of Johor's palace, positioned on a hill overlooking the strait between Johor and Singapore. Defending British,

Indian and Australian forces were scattered in groups along the beaches around the island, with gaps between troops and openings in the continuous fire system. There was a lack of strength and defence in depth, as well as strategic management for leading the fighting. As a result, lower-level officers were unable to act when the telephone connection broke down. The British had ammunition and supplies to handle a three-month siege – provided they retained control of the crucial water reservoirs.

After one week of preparation, Japanese artillery began firing on the aerodrome, naval base and central parts of the city on 4th February. On 7th February, the Imperial Guard conducted a fake landing on an island north-east of Singapore. This led Percival to believe the main attack would come from the north-east, despite the fact that Australian reconnaissance patrols had revealed that large quantities of shipping materials and forces had assembled to the west and north-west of the Singapore-Johor strait.

**ON 8TH FEBRUARY**, a devastating artillery bombardment started with all 440 guns trained on a 15-kilometre stretch of the northern beach between Lim Chu Kang in the north-west corner and the naval base at Sembawang. It lasted for nine hours with approximately 50 shells per hour being fired from each gun. As darkness fell, the Japanese 5th and 18th Divisions sailed across to the Australian sector of Singapore's north-western coast. The defensive holes were found and quickly penetrated. By the afternoon of 9th February, they'd captured one of their priority targets: Tengah.

On 10th February, the Imperial Guard suffered heavy casualties in the area around modern-day Woodlands Checkpoint to the west of the causeway. The guard's commander lost his nerve and asked to withdraw, putting the entire left flank of the Japanese forces at risk. But for reasons unknown, the Australian forces who'd successfully repelled their attack withdrew. Soon after, a preliminary order specifying a possible perimeter around Singapore City was misinterpreted and an important hill north of Jurong was abandoned without a fight. This meant the British giving up the entire western portion of Singapore.

Meanwhile three regiments from each of the Japanese 5th and 18th Infantry Divisions conducted a night-time bayonet charge with their divisional commanders at their head. They successfully occupied the heights at Bukit Timah north-west of the city centre, where Yamashita established his new headquarters in the Ford motor factory. The Japanese were running low on ammunition, however, and knowing that his forces lacked the



resources for a protracted battle in a built-up area, the general decided on a bluff to try and force a decision. 20 copies of a personal letter to Percival calling him to “give up this meaningless and desperate resistance” were dropped over British lines by plane.

**ON 14TH FEBRUARY**, the Japanese struck with all the force they could muster from exhausted troops with little ammunition left. The fight became brutal. The hill of Bukit Chandu (‘Opium Hill’ in Malay) was fiercely defended by C Company of the 1st Malaya Infantry Brigade under the command of a young lieutenant, Adnan bin Saidi. The company fought to the last man, after which the Japanese tied the badly wounded lieutenant to a tree and bayoneted him to death. The victors seized the water reservoirs along with the foremost British positions in the north of the city along with Alexandria military hospital to the south. The hospital was stormed, and 200 patients, nurses and doctors were stabbed to death using the long bayonets on the soldiers’ Arisaka rifles.

The Japanese fighting spirit is perhaps best seen in the following observation of a soldier reporting from the front line to make a report: “The upper half of his body was blood-stained. Standing motionless before the detachment commander he said, ‘The

## “THE JAPANESE TIED THE BADLY WOUNDED LIEUTENANT TO A TREE AND BAYONETED HIM”

company commander, sir, has been killed in action, there are many casualties, but all is well.’ As he came to the end of his report he fell.”

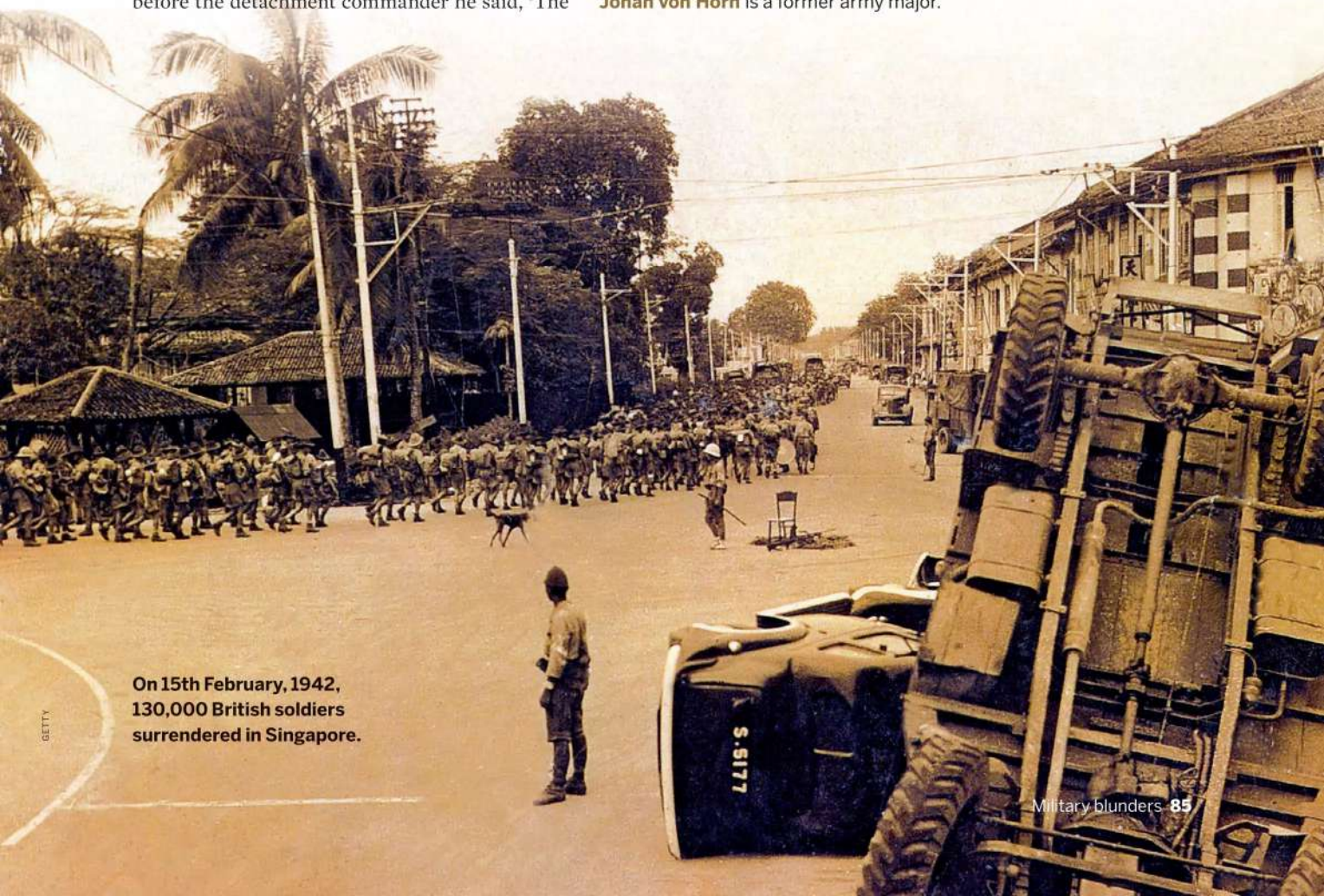
Percival met his commanders on 15th February. The situation was critical, but they still retained 150 25-pounder howitzers with approximately 140,000 shells. Percival outlined two options: a counterattack to recapture food depots at Bukit Timah, or surrender. All advised against the attack – Percival later wrote he “reluctantly decided to accept the advice of the senior officers present and capitulate”.

Yamashita’s bluff had succeeded. The British defeat was the simple and obvious consequence of political miscalculations and wishful thinking, combined with poor intelligence and a failure to coordinate military resources. ✚

**Johan von Horn** is a former army major.

**Further reading:**  
**From the Japanese Perspective: The Capture of Singapore, 1942** (2007) by Masanobu Tsuji ✚ **Did Singapore have to fall?** (2003) by Karl Hack & Kevin Blackburn.

On 15th February, 1942, 130,000 British soldiers surrendered in Singapore.





Failed raid laid the foundation for D-Day

# DIEPPE RAID

The situation looked bleak for the Allies in the summer of 1942, and Churchill was under intense pressure to open a second front. His answer was an exploratory raid on Dieppe. The landing ended in disaster – but provided valuable experience for the future.

Text: **ROINE WIKLUND**

**“THE GERMANS HAD  
TRANSFORMED THE FRENCH  
COASTAL CITY INTO A FORTRESS”**



# DISASTER

**T**he massive invasion of Normandy that began on 6th June, 1944 was considered an unqualified military success. But behind the landing was a previous disastrous attempt in a completely different location. Two years earlier, 6,000 Allied soldiers attacked the port city of Dieppe on the French Atlantic coast, resulting in more than half being killed, wounded or taken prisoner by the Germans.

One crucial reason for the failed landing was that no one had any experience of such an action. This type of warfare – joint operations with multiple branches working in close

cooperation – had been largely ignored in Britain in the late 1930s as tensions rose in Europe. The army, navy and air force service chiefs were aware of this and tried to rectify it. In May 1938, the joint ISTDC (Inter-Service Training and Development Centre) department was established with the aim of developing strategies and equipment for joint operations.

In June 1940, Prime Minister Winston Churchill decided that British special forces should be merged into an umbrella organisation. Lieutenant General Alan Bourne was appointed Adviser to the Chiefs of Staff on Combined Operations (CO). Bourne ►

**Dieppe the day  
after the raid.**





## DIEPPE, 1942

► was put in charge of the remnants of the ISTDC and six independent companies. Only 11 days after its formation, CO carried out its first raid on France with Operation Collar, which killed two Germans. This was followed by an attack on Guernsey on 14th July where several of the commandos were killed or taken prisoner.

## “THE FIRST MAJOR OPERATION WAS LAUNCHED IN 1941”

aristocrat who was more accustomed to court and political circles. At first, Mountbatten was reluctant to give up his ship's command, although his new position included a promotion to commodore. However, he was persuaded by Churchill when he learned that his new role included planning and carrying out more ambitious attacks against German targets along the Atlantic coast, and helping coordinate the invasion of France. It soon became apparent, however, that the service chiefs did not intend to honour Churchill's many promises. According to them, Mountbatten's role was limited to advising on major operations, and he was only occasionally called in for Chiefs of Staff Committee (CSC) meetings.

**THE NUMBER OF** staff working for Combined Operations soon rose from 23 people to a few hundred, and an office was also set up in South East Asia. Many of the people housed in Mountbatten's new headquarters were considered eccentric by those on the outside, and the workplace was seen as unorthodox. But many testified to its good working atmosphere, and during Mountbatten's tenure bold plans began to develop – Vågsøy in Norway, Rommel's headquarters in North Africa and a radar plant in France were all attacked in 1941-42.

Saint-Nazaire housed the world's largest dry dock. It was where the damaged battleship *Bismarck* had been heading when she was sunk in May 1941. In January 1942, the German battleship *Tirpitz* was ready to set sail, and to prevent this dreaded ship from reaching the Atlantic, it was decided that the dry dock in Saint-Nazaire had to be destroyed, as it was the only place on the Atlantic coast where such large ships could be repaired. Operation Chariot was carried out in March 1942, and despite heavy losses the commandos succeeded in their objective. This raid went down in history as “The Greatest Raid of All”, and Churchill promoted Mountbatten to both acting vice admiral and Chief of Combined Operations with his own seat among the service

**CHURCHILL WASN'T HAPPY** with the outcome of these operations, and on 7th July, 68-year-old Admiral of the Fleet Roger Keyes was appointed Director of Combined Operations. Keyes was a colourful personality who'd served in the Navy since 1885. He'd participated in battles against slave ships off the coast of Africa, fought in China during the Boxer Rebellion and was responsible for several spectacular efforts during World War I, including the failed raids on the German submarine base in Zeebrugge in April 1918. Keyes displayed a stubborn determination to always attack and was one of Britain's most decorated war heroes. In addition, he was a close friend of Churchill.

As head of joint operations, Keyes was given more freedom than his predecessor. He moved his staff from the Admiralty to Combined Operations HQ, his own headquarters in Richmond Terrace in central London. In October, a training centre was set up in Inveraray, Scotland, where commandos received basic training. The force was made up of volunteers, and around 2,000 had begun training by the end of 1940. The soldiers were trained in close combat, explosives, winter warfare, skydiving, amphibious operations and rock climbing. Initially, there were no manuals, so the hand-picked instructors often had to create their own training programmes.

The first major operation was launched in March 1941. 250 commandos attacked Lofoten in Norway, seized important parts of the Enigma encryption machine, and took hundreds of prisoners. But many perceived Keyes as difficult to work with, and the service chiefs often complained to Churchill, who finally yielded to them. In a directive dated October 1941, the title of the head of Combined Operations was downgraded to Adviser, which immediately prompted Keyes to resign. Another of Churchill's favourites, Commander Louis Mountbatten, succeeded him. Mountbatten's royal pedigree meant that not everyone in the Admiralty looked with favourable eyes on the jovial and swiftly promoted



The Allies' attack on Dieppe finally took place on 19th August, 1942.

Landing vessels heading towards the coast. The smoke was laid down by one of the boats to protect them.

GAMMA-KEYSTONE/GETTY







Canadian forces only captured a few hundred metres of beach at Dieppe.

chiefs on the CSC, a move that was resented by some of the division chiefs.

**AT A WASHINGTON** conference towards the end of 1942, Churchill and US President Franklin D Roosevelt agreed to defeat Germany before confronting other Axis' powers. There were, however, several leading US military figures who wanted to focus all US energies on Japan. Parts of the US military and political leadership were also unimpressed by what they perceived as Britain's unwillingness to attack in Europe. Worries that the Germans would defeat the Soviet Union during the summer therefore prompted the preparation of two different continental invasion plans. Operation Roundup involved a full landing in northern France in the spring of 1943, while Operation Sledgehammer was planned for early autumn 1942 if the situation on the Eastern Front deteriorated. In this case, either Cherbourg or Brest would be attacked, with a major invasion of the coast the following spring.

In early 1942, the British lacked the resources for a full-scale invasion, and the US was strongly discouraged from doing so. Britain's strategy was to break down the enemy's fighting ability through blockades and attacks on the German flanks, along with support for allied forces on the continent. Churchill therefore wanted to beat the Germans in the Mediterranean and then attack from the south through Italy. But pressure from the US and the Soviet Union to open a second front in Europe was intense, and in May, Soviet Foreign Minister ►

## Lord Mountbatten

★ Admiral Mountbatten, Queen Victoria's grandson, was born Prince Louis of Battenberg in 1900. Mountbatten joined the fleet during World War I and participated in several operations as a flotilla commander from 1939. His background and rapid advancement in the navy, as well as his close ties to the royal family and political circles, made the Admiralty wary of him. However, Mountbatten was Churchill's favourite, and in October 1941, he took over as head of Combined Operations.

After the disaster in Dieppe, Mountbatten's relationship with the Canadians became strained, but he argued that the lessons of Dieppe were crucial to the success of the D-Day landings in 1944, a view supported by Churchill.

From October 1943 until the end of the war, he served as commander of the Allied

forces in South East Asia. After the war, Mountbatten was appointed Viceroy of India. He helped India gain independence in 1947, something for which Churchill never forgave him. He then resumed his military career, including being appointed First Sea Lord from 1955–59 and Governor of the Isle of Wight from 1969–74.

Mountbatten, his grandson Nicholas, and one other member of his circle were killed by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in 1979 while fishing in Ireland.



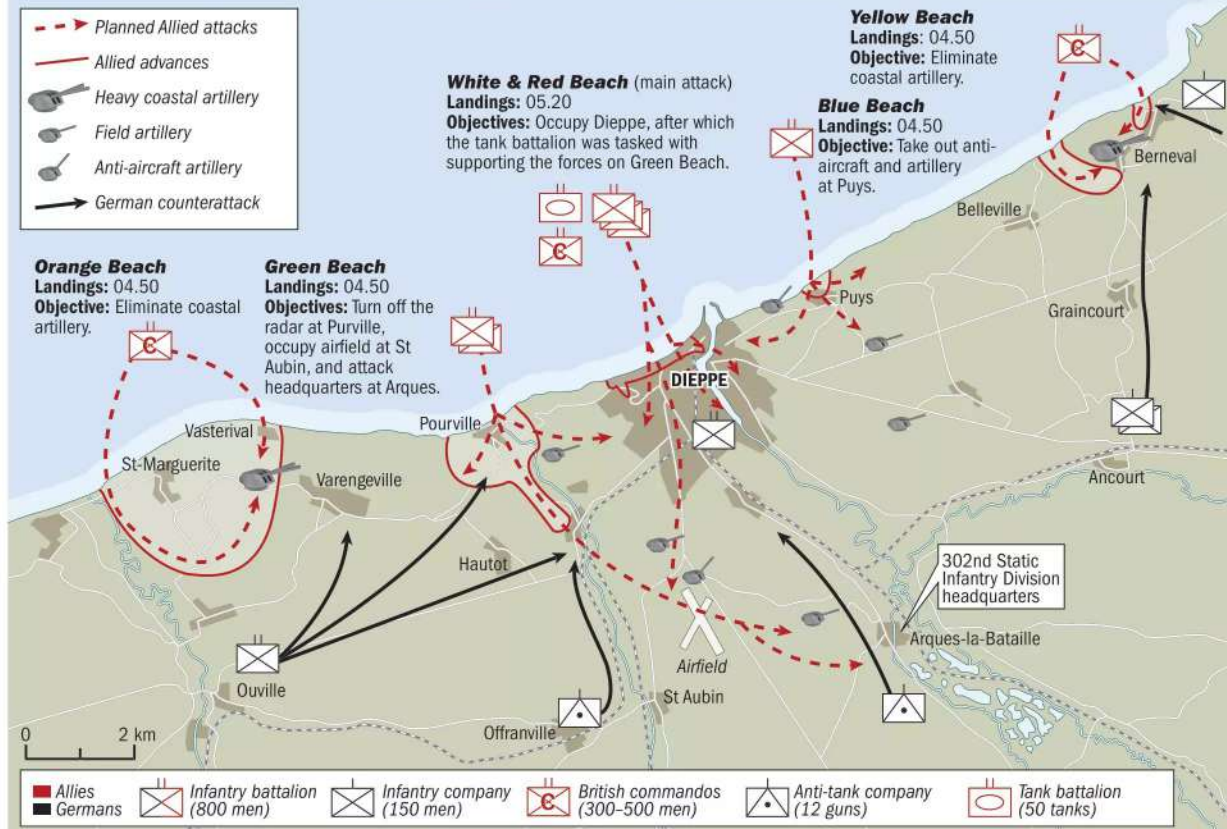
Louis Mountbatten.



## The raid on Dieppe

★ The Allies landed in five locations at Dieppe. But only the most westerly attack (on *Orange Beach*) was successful.

ERIK LINDBOLM



▶ Vyacheslav Molotov came to London to present Stalin's call for an Allied attack on the Western Front before the end of the year. British newspapers also stirred up domestic public opinion by demanding another front. Churchill and Roosevelt subsequently agreed that the British would conduct a major attack over the English Channel in 1942.

In the spring of 1942, Mountbatten and Combined Operations made plans to attack the port city of Dieppe, but the operation could not be carried out solely using commando forces.

**THERE WERE AROUND** 200,000 Canadian soldiers in Britain at this time, many of whom had been stationed there since 1939. The soldiers were volunteers and were mainly used for surveillance and security. Eventually, dissatisfaction with this monotonous service began to spread, with disciplinary problems as a result. To restore the soldiers' morale, it was decided that the 2nd Canadian Division would participate in the operation. A total of 6,000 soldiers would land on the Normandy coast, protected by a Royal Navy barrage and RAF fighter cover. Dieppe would be occupied, and then the soldiers would return to

Britain. After weeks of training, the troops boarded the ships, but bad weather stranded them in port. On 7th July, they were discovered by German aircraft and bombed. Further reports of bad weather along with the Germans' early detection of the invasion force led to the operation being cancelled.

Mountbatten still believed the operation could work and managed to persuade Churchill. The raid on Dieppe was to be given another chance in August, now under the codename Jubilee. However, some important features of the previous plan were changed. There would be no air landing to knock out the two heavy coastal batteries that guarded Dieppe's inlet. Instead, two commando units along with some US Rangers would be landed east and west of the city to complete that part of the mission before the main attack began.

The attack against Dieppe was to be carried out by six reinforced Canadian battalions. Infantry, engineering and armoured forces would land on the stony Dieppe beach. The port, telephone exchanges, railways, gas stations and other important installations were to be destroyed by engineering forces. Important documents and communication equipment would be seized and taken back to



Canadian prisoners of war in Dieppe.  
Two-thirds of the Canadian soldiers at  
Dieppe were killed or taken prisoner.



Britain. The soldiers were also to land on both sides of Dieppe to capture and destroy artillery batteries and a radar system before launching flank attacks on the city. A few kilometres inland, there was an airport that housed the German military headquarters, according to intelligence. It should also be captured. A Royal Marines command unit would also participate in the attack. Their target was to capture the German vessels in the port and take them back across the Channel.

**THE ATTACK WAS** set to start at 04.50 with the commandos' blitz against the heavy coastal batteries to be followed by a direct attack on Dieppe at 05.20. The Royal Navy had set aside 237 ships for the operation but firmly rejected Mountbatten's request for naval artillery support. They feared a battleship assigned to such a task would be sunk by German aircraft.

Determined to avoid German detection, the ships' routes across the Channel were also changed. The soldiers would now embark from five different points along the English coast and be transported directly to their respective attack targets at night. One of the biggest changes to the new plan was

## **“THE ATTACK WAS SET TO START AT 04.50 WITH THE COMMANDOS' BLITZ”**

that the RAF would no longer bomb Dieppe the night before the attack. This was to both avoid arousing German suspicion and prevent debris from bombed houses blocking the streets and hampering the raiding force's advance. Instead, Hurricanes deployed as fighter-bombers would attack direct targets on the beaches and around the city. Another important task for the RAF was to protect the landing from German aircraft. Consequently, a total of 61 fighter squadrons and seven bomber squadrons were assigned to the operation – more than 800 aircraft in total. This was a larger number than had protected the British Isles during the Battle of Britain. The hope was that the Luftwaffe would be lured into engaging all its forces against the RAF, giving it the opportunity to decimate the already stretched German air force. One of the reasons why Dieppe was chosen as a target was that German ►



## DIEPPE, 1942



**Soldiers from 4 Commando back in Newhaven, East Sussex, after the raid.**

defences were perceived to be weaker there than in many other places. It comprised units from the permanently based 302nd Static Infantry Division with troops from Germany and the occupied territories. There was a shortage of weapons and ammunition, and a large proportion of its heavier weapons were captured during previous campaigns. Nevertheless, the Germans had been in the area for over two years and were firmly entrenched in concrete fortifications and bunkers. The beaches were mined, and barbed wire had been rolled out over them. There were also several artillery batteries in and around Dieppe. The Germans had transformed the French coastal city into a fortress.

**THE ATTACK ON** the Orange Coast battery to the west went to plan, with two groups of commandos managing to negotiate the barbed wire and take out the beach's defences before climbing the steep cliffs. One group then waited in the woods in front of the battery while the other approached it from the rear. When the battery's guns suddenly opened fire, the forest group decided to attack. A 50-mm mortar was set up and the Germans were caught by surprise when the second bomb blasted one of the main guns, and the ammunition store exploded. Then the other commando group also attacked from the battery's rear, clearing the area of remaining defenders and

blasting the other guns. The commandos then returned to the beach to sail back to Britain. It was a textbook example of a successful commando raid.

The attack on the eastern coastal battery at Yellow Beach did not go so well. The landings' ships were dispersed during the crossing after coming under fire from German ships. Only 140 commandos made it ashore and were soon discovered. They were pushed back before eventually being forced to surrender. Only one soldier managed to escape. The Canadian raids east and west of Dieppe met the same fate. The German defenders had been alerted and the eastern attack on Blue Beach was effectively halted on the shoreline. The third attack wave turned as they saw the destruction. In the west things went better initially, but as German reserves began to emerge, the forces there were also forced to retreat.

**THE MAIN ATTACK** on Dieppe began at 05.12 with an artillery barrage from Royal Navy ships coinciding with the strike aircraft flying in waves over the coast to bomb the German positions. A second wave released smoke grenades, and the first soldiers landed at 05.23. The attack faced only modest defensive fire, and the Canadians crossed the first line of barbed wire without major losses. But before they reached the second line, the Germans



had recovered from the initial bombardment, and were now opening fire from all sides. 28 of the Allies' 30 Churchill tanks landed without too much trouble, but the Canadians were still unable to advance into the city. The soldiers took cover, and many tanks got stuck or were disabled on the rocky beach. The attack stalled.

At 09.15, the force's commander, Major General John Hamilton Roberts, realised that the operation had failed. Of the 6,000-plus soldiers involved, 3,367 had been killed, captured or were listed as missing. 850 of those who returned had never participated in the raid. German losses amounted to 600 dead, wounded and missing.

The RAF also had a dark day. The smokescreen was effective, but the bombing of German defensive installations had little effect. Fog prevented the German planes from taking off until 07.00, but then 120 planes engaged in dogfights over Dieppe. Most British air divisions consisted of Spitfires while the Germans were able to augment their Messerschmitt Bf 109 fighters with Focke-Wulf Fw 190s, a newer aircraft with better performance than the Spitfire. The Germans also had the advantage that their airbases were closer. German bombers attacked at around 09.00, and an hour later more German squadrons began arriving from more distant airfields. The RAF lost at least 106 aircraft to the Germans' 48, of which 28 were bombers.

**MOUNTBATTEN WAS WIDELY** criticised after the disaster, primarily in Canada, even though he'd not been in operational command of the raid. But he continued as chief with Churchill's full support. The failed raid didn't pass quietly however, and some personnel in Combined Operations HQ were reassigned or removed in the wake of the operation. Despite the failure, the dearly bought lessons of Dieppe did inform future Allied amphibious operations. While Hitler and the German High Command became convinced of the importance of static coastal defences and focused all their efforts on constructing the Atlantic Wall, the Allies were forced to re-evaluate their own ideas. They were determined to learn from the attack and not repeat the same mistake. They realised that directly assaulting a well-defended port city was not practical, and that it would also require better coordination between different military branches, better intelligence on enemy defences, a much larger fleet of landing craft, air landings behind enemy lines, heavy bombardment of key targets before the attack and more powerful fire from larger-calibre weapons, both naval and at close quarters. In Combined Operations HQ, work was soon underway developing landing craft with greater firepower to cover troops during landing operations. By April

## "THE CANADIAN RAIDS EAST AND WEST OF DIEPPE MET THE SAME FATE"

1943, Combined Operations forces had swelled to 50,000 men, 89 troop transports and more than 2,600 landing craft adapted for different troops and vehicles. Mountbatten realised his department had grown too large, and so transferred the ships, landing craft and their crews to the navy.

Better vehicles were also required. In 1943, Major General Percy Hobart of the 79th Armoured Division was tasked with developing vehicles capable of creating and securing a bridgehead during amphibious attacks. These were largely remodelled Sherman and Churchill tanks, which soon became known as "Hobart's Funnies". Their number included, for example, the Crocodile with flamethrower, the Crab for clearing mines, amphibious DD tanks, armoured bulldozers and the ARK (Armoured Ramp Carrier) to act as a bridge or ramp for other vehicles. All were to prove their worth during the D-Day Landings.

An artificial port, Mulberry, was also developed in Combined Operations HQ with separate parts that could be transported and then installed to support an attack. This meant the Allies no longer need to capture a port to build a bridgehead for further incursions inland. To provide a fuel supply during any invasion of France, Mountbatten and his staff had already made plans for a pipeline across the English Channel back in 1942.

**AT THE CASABLANCA** Conference in January 1943, it was decided that planning for an invasion of France should continue, and in March Lieutenant General Frederick E Morgan was made chief of staff of the Allied Command. Morgan was given responsibility for planning Operation Overlord, along with a small group of British and Americans. Combined Operations was thus sidelined, although Morgan did utilise its knowledge and expertise by transferring staff in from the organisation.

A 113-page report from Morgan was the basis for Operation Overlord, the new invasion plan approved in August 1943. Morgan included the experience from the failed invasion attempt a year earlier. The Dieppe raid thus became a major contributor to the Allied success when the great invasion of Normandy began on 6th June, 1944 – D-Day. 🇬🇧

**Roine Wiklund** is an engineering historian at Lulea University of Technology.

**Further reading:**  
**Dieppe 1942 – Prelude to D-Day** (2003) by Ken Ford  
★ **British Commandos 1940–46** (2006) by Timothy Robert Moreman ★  
**Mountbatten – Apprentice War Lord** (2010) by Adrian Smith.



**DNIEPER OFFENSIVE, 1943**

# SOVIET PARATROOPERS JUMPED IN BLIND

Poor planning and resource management can scupper even the best idea. The Soviets' airborne landing to secure a bridgehead across the River Dnieper in September 1943 is a textbook example of how not to do it.

Text: **ANDERS FAGER**





In July 1943, the Germans launched Operation Citadel on the Eastern Front. A pincer attack on the Kursk bulge, the offensive stalled when it met staunch Soviet resistance. Then the Red Army counterattacked north of Kursk across a 100-kilometre wide front, and the German army, drained of the strength to repulse the move, was forced to fall back.

It took a few weeks for reserves to bolster the Red Army to the south of Kursk, but on 3rd August, they too were ready to attack and Operation Rumyantsev was launched. Surprised by the number of Soviet divisions against them and with no hope of reserves to turn imminent defeat into victory, the Germans abandoned Kharkov on 23rd August and continued west.

Keen to keep up the pressure, Stavka, the Soviet army's high command, unleashed a massive offensive against the lower section of the Dnieper. Its goal was to liberate Ukraine, east of the river.

At the same time, Stavka also saw an opportunity to create bridgeheads over the Dnieper from the



**Soviet paratroopers are dropped from Lisunov Li-2 aircraft over the River Dnieper in 1943.**

air. Major General Ivan Zatevakhin, the commander of the Soviet airborne forces (VDV) was ordered to pull together a makeshift airborne corps. Three airborne guard brigades were duly assembled and began training for parachute operations. (The VDV had been confined to ground assaults since the bloody catastrophe at Vyazma, west of Moscow, in January 1942.)

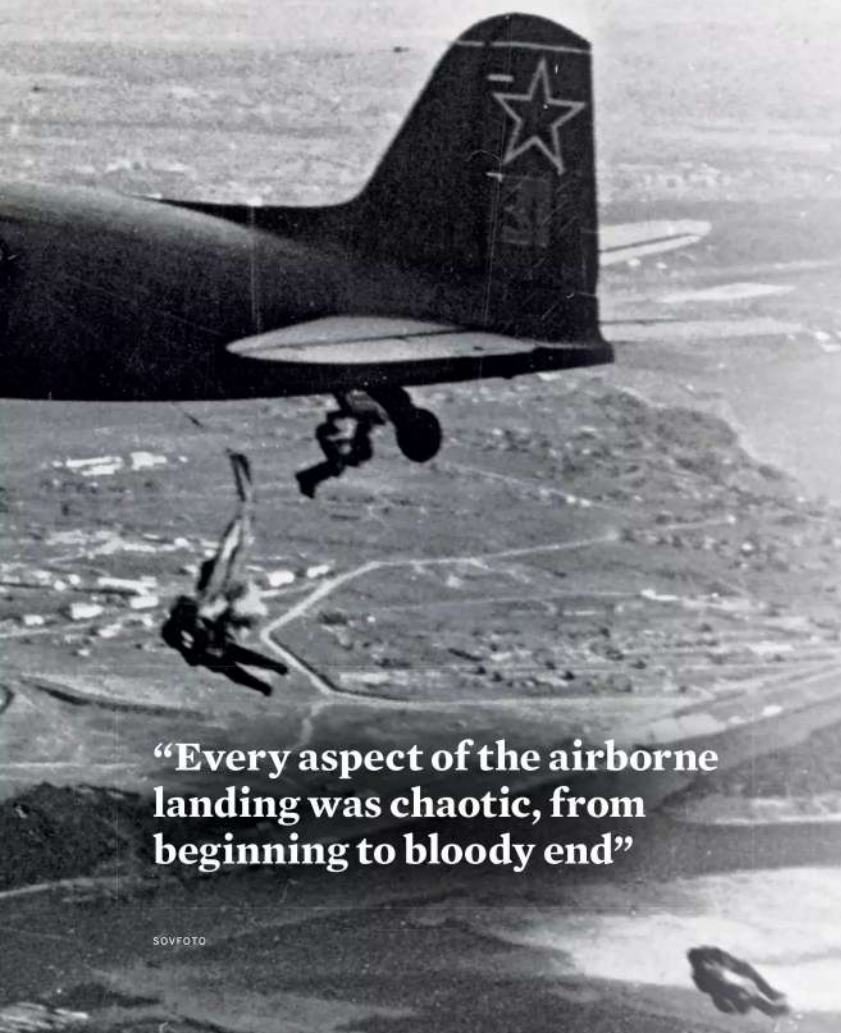
At the end of August, the Red Army attacked again, with 2.5 million men along a front that spanned almost 1,400 kilometres. The fighting was fierce, but on 15th September, the German army was able to retreat towards the fortifications that were being hastily assembled on the west bank of the River Dnieper.

In mid-September, the new VDV corps was ordered to join the Voronezh front, led by General Nikolai Vatutin, which was preparing for an offensive towards Kiev to the west of the river. In what increasingly looked like a race, Vatutin reformed the 3rd Guards Tank Army as a mobile group on 19th September and tasked it with advancing on the Dnieper as quickly as possible. If they were to reach Kiev on the far bank, it was crucial to secure bridgeheads across the wide river.

Once across, the Soviets intended to follow their usual tactic of breaking through the German lines and then unleashing small mobile units to wreak havoc in the enemy's rear. Earlier in the war, these small units had often been torn apart by swift German counterattacks – the 3rd Guards Tank Army and their commander, Lieutenant General Pavel Rybalko, had been subject to such counteroffensives several times – but now they were more experienced and better trained. Besides, there were hardly any Germans blocking their path – they were all running from the Soviet armoured divisions, towards the bridges at Kiev and Kaniv.

**RYBALKO'S T-34 TANKS** thundered west across a 70-kilometre front. On the night of 22nd September, they reached the Dnieper near Bukrin, where the river makes a big turn, referred to as the Dnieper loop. On the 23rd, the general's infantry began crossing the river. They faced almost no resistance. The only German troops within 50 kilometres of the new bridgehead were 120 flak academy NCO candidates and a panzer reconnaissance battalion. If Rybalko had had a floating bridge, he could have sent tanks and artillery across the river, but he had to make do with building rafts on-site. There was no time to lose, German units were on their way, and soon the Dnieper loop would be filled with them.

Rybalko's dash had shown that the Soviet army had mastered the finer points of mobile warfare, but Stavka wanted to try something even more daring. ▶



**“Every aspect of the airborne landing was chaotic, from beginning to bloody end”**



- On 21st September, Zatevakhin's airborne corps was ordered to prepare for a landing in the Dnieper loop in two days' time. Two brigades would be dropped to protect the Bukrin bridgehead, while a third would occupy the Germans, drawing fire to allow another crossing to be forced at Kaniv.

**MARSHAL GEORGY ZHUKOV** had approved the plan to reinforce Rybalko's bridgehead from the air a few days earlier, even before the Soviets knew where, and if, Rybalko would cross. Given the chaos that followed, it is difficult to understand what was ordered by whom and in what order, and what was the subject of prior planning and what was pure opportunism. The war was already moving faster than the Soviet system could handle and when Zhukov and Vatutin wanted to increase the pace still further, it was an invitation to disaster.

As it was, every aspect of the airborne landing was chaotic, from beginning to bloody end. The weather over the Dnieper loop was cloudy, which made reconnaissance impossible. The operation then had to be postponed by a day to the 24th to allow extra time for the transport aircraft, paratroopers and fuel to reach the five airbases selected as take-off points. In the end, Vatutin ordered the pilots to drop whatever and whoever was ready, sacrificing the advantages of dropping the three brigades simultaneously in favour of speed.

In the event, one of the three brigades failed to arrive at its airbase on time, was consequently scratched from the plan and ordered to act as a reserve. Mission orders were changed and didn't reach the company commanders until the paratroopers were ready to board. On the evening

**"In some places, they were in combat before they reached the ground"**

of 24th September, commanders ran between the planes briefing the pilots on their new destinations. Flight safety officers refused to carry the number of paratroopers listed in the orders, there were too few planes and those that were available had trouble reaching their assigned airbases because of the weather. The original loading plan was scrapped. Each aircraft would now need to make three trips to drop the two available brigades, and it was uncertain how long the fuel would last.

The plan disintegrated further once the flights commenced. Radio equipment, anti-tank guns, mines and supplies were left at the airbase. The VDV troops lacked shovels and warm clothing, because they assumed that they would only have to wait a day or two for Rybalko's tanks to arrive. Instead of flying in formation, the transport planes flew the 200-kilometre journey to the Dnieper in single file, dropping units in a single area so that they became mixed up on the ground.

**AT 19.30 ON** 24th September, the first paratroopers jumped out over the Dnieper loop and straight into the path of the German 19th Panzer Division, which was heading towards Rybalko's bridgeheads. In some places, the VDV troops were in combat before they reached the ground.

The landing was as chaotic as the departure. The orders were unclear and many of the paratroopers

Soviet soldiers preparing the rafts to cross the Dnieper (the sign reads "To Kiev!").







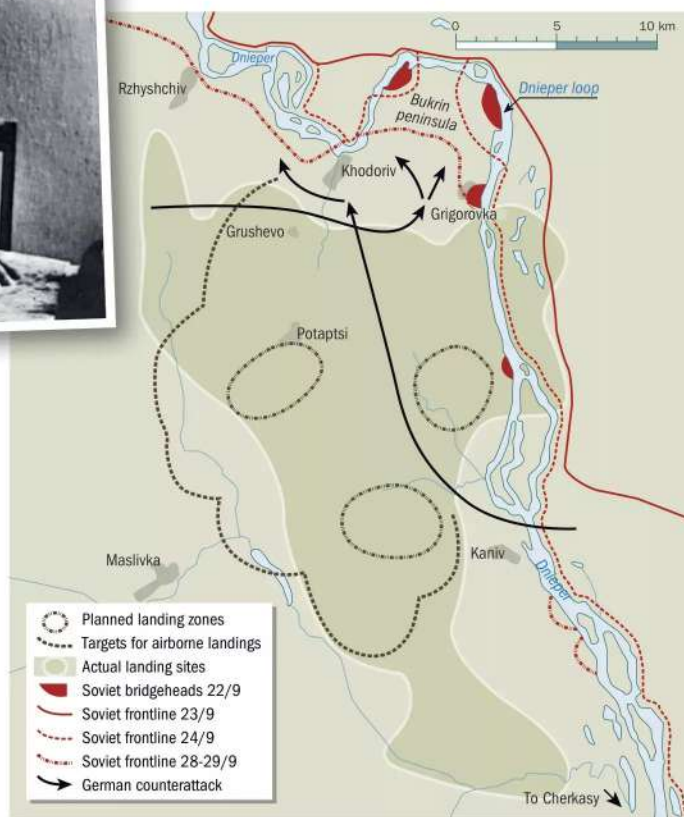
**General Vatutin didn't expect much resistance when he ordered the airborne landing.**

had never parachuted during live missions before. Areas that aerial reconnaissance photographs had shown as a deserted a few days earlier, were now crawling with Germans. The pilots that were ordered to drop flares over the landing zones missed their marks. Others found themselves taking anti-aircraft fire, dodged in panic and lost their bearings. Soon, the air above the Dnieper loop was filled with tracer fire and zigzagging planes searching for suitably lit landing zones. It was difficult for the pilots to distinguish between falling anti-aircraft shells and the flares lighting the drop points, especially because in many cases, the Germans were already at the landing zones. Several pilots became so uncertain about their position and the situation on the ground that they simply flew back to base without dropping the troops. Others flew around haphazardly before finally telling the men in the plane that it was probably time to jump.

**ON THE MORNING** of the 25th, the two airborne brigades were spread over a 30-kilometre by 90-kilometre area that was crawling with German mobile forces. The operation was over before it had begun, and the Soviets had gained nothing. The Germans had no idea what was going on, either, but their decentralised command structure was more resilient in chaotic situations than the Red Army's top-down approach could ever hope to be. In several cases, the Germans used captured maps and orders to reach targets before the paratroopers. It was only at the town of Grushevo, where 150 paratroopers fought to the last man, that the Germans suffered any significant losses.

Almost a thousand paratroopers were killed or captured by the Germans in the first 24 hours. The Soviets' white parachutes, strewn across the landscape, showed the Germans where to search. Meanwhile, flights from the Soviet airbases slowed and then stopped as the fuel supplies ran dry.

Only 4,500 out of the 6,000 men available had been dropped. Around 2,000 of those who had



jumped now gathered in small, isolated groups. Some didn't know which side of the Dnieper they were on. Some tried to find dropped supplies, others sought ways to link up with Rybalko's troops. Many joined local partisans. Nearly 1,500 were missing. It took over a week for Stavka to understand what had happened and how little had been achieved.

By 25th September, the paratroopers were no longer considered a threat by the Germans, who instead concentrated on restricting Rybalko's bridgehead. For the next few weeks, the Germans would occasionally flush out small groups of paratroopers who had holed up in the area.

In mid-November, the remains of the 5th Airborne Brigade, the only brigade to return from the drop, crossed the Dnieper to rejoin the Red Army.

The air landing at Dnieper was the second and last time the Soviets attempted a large-scale airborne operation during World War II. Later German critiques believed that while "the reasoning was sound", the airborne operation lacked the expertise to carry out the plan. It was just like the landing at Vyazma in January 1942: a total failure characterised by incompetence and sloppiness. In the chaos of Kaniv-Bukrin, many German troops did not even realise that an air drop had taken place.

**Anders Fager** is a writer and reserve officer.

**The Germans withdrew across the Dnieper when the Soviets advanced on 22nd September.**

**Further reading:**  
**From the Don to the Dnieper – Soviet Offensive Operations December 1942–August 1943** (1991)  
 by David M Glantz  
**★ A History of Soviet Airborne Forces** (1994)  
 by David M Glantz.





On 17th September, 1944, 20,000 Allied soldiers landed in the central Netherlands.

# 'SIMPLE' OPERATION ENDED IN A BLOODBATH

Operation Market Garden's goal was to facilitate a quick end to World War II. Allied paratroopers would capture bridges in the Netherlands and open the way to Germany for US and British tanks. But no one had told the forces that landed in Arnhem that two German armoured divisions lay in wait.

Text: **CHRISTER BERGSTRÖM**

**S**unday 17th September, 1944 was a glorious late summer's day in the German-occupied Netherlands. World War II had raged for more than five years, but now there was a growing belief it would soon be over.

In the cities of Arnhem and Nijmegen, the sky was shrouded by heavy, black clouds after last night's British bombing, but otherwise it was quiet. At noon, there was a growing hum of engines.

Half an hour later, 12 four-engine British aircraft roared over the city. This time they had no bombs, just lots of elite 'Red Devil' British parachutists – almost 200 in total – who jumped from the planes above the Dutch landscape. Orders were yelled as

they landed, the soldiers went into position and everything seemed to go as planned.

**THE GERMANS APPEARED** to have been taken by surprise. Only two paratroopers were wounded by German ground fire, and the first Germans encountered by the British swiftly surrendered.

The British men worked methodically. They marked two glider landing zones by the railway and a drop zone for more paratroopers a little further west. This is how largest air landing in military history began. Its purpose was nothing short of a quick end to the war.

On the German side, there was total confusion. In the village of Oosterbeek outside Arnhem, German



**1st Airborne Division badge.**





A British patrol in the village of Oosterbeek on 23rd September, 1944. They had been driven out of Arnhem.

D.M. SMITH/IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM/GETTY

Field Marshal Walter Model abandoned his lunch and fled from his headquarters. He believed the operation's purpose was to capture him.

**FOR THE BRITISH** elite force, it looked like it would be a simple operation. They had no idea what horrible carnage they were about to face.

In September 1944, the battle for Normandy was long over. The Allies had driven the Germans out of both France and Belgium after the 6th June landings. But then the advance stalled. At their own borders the Germans proved tenacious defenders. Walter Model, famous field marshal on the Eastern Front, had been redeployed and had performed miracles with the crushed German armies in the

**“[THE OPERATION’S] PURPOSE WAS NOTHING SHORT OF A QUICK END TO THE WAR.”**

west. No matter how the Allies tried to break through, they were beaten back.

That's when British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery put forth a bold plan: the newly formed First Allied Airborne Army would be deployed to a series of bridges across the Waal and Rhine rivers in the Netherlands and hold the crossings until a tank division arrived. This is how he expected to 'unlock' ►



# OPERATION MARKET GARDEN, 1944

ERIK JOHANNESSEN



Allied trucks are subjected to German shelling on the bridge over the Waal River at Nijmegen on 20th September, 1944.

UIG/GETTY



## British commanders



**Robert "Roy" Urquhart:**

British major general. Headed the 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem. After the war he acted as an adviser during filming of the movie about the battle, 'A Bridge Too Far' (1977) – where he was played by Sean Connery.



**Bernard Law Montgomery:**

British field marshal. Led the British-Canadian 21st Army Group and was responsible for planning Operation Market Garden. Best known for defeating "Desert Fox" Rommel with the Eighth Army in North Africa.

## German generals



**Wilhelm Bittrich:**

German general. Bittrich was critical of Hitler and supported the attack against the Führer on 20th July, 1944. Commanded the 2nd SS Panzer Corps, which wiped out Allied forces in Arnhem.



**Walter Model:**

German field marshal general. Led Army Group B in Arnhem. Model was nicknamed "The Führer's Fireman" after saving the Germans from several difficult battlefield situations. He took his own life just before the end of the war.

- the German defence and make it possible to advance quickly to the Ruhr area. Since Montgomery had previously been accused of being overly cautious, everyone was amazed at the boldness of the plan.

**MONTGOMERY HAD COMMANDED** the British-Canadian 21st Army Group that ploughed through northern France and Belgium at a high pace in August 1944. He'd also led the Allies to victory at el-Alamein in the autumn of 1942. But despite his pedigree, General Dwight D Eisenhower, the Allied supreme commander, opposed the plan. Instead, Eisenhower wanted the new airborne army to be deployed behind the lines of the German divisions that faced US forces further south.

The rivalry between British and Americans had characterised the entire campaign from Normandy onwards, and had developed into open hostility between Montgomery and General George S Patton. Montgomery never hid his contempt for Patton, and on one occasion the US general became so enraged that he yelled, "Let me go on to Falaise and we'll drive the British into the sea for another Dunkirk!"

Eisenhower did his best to balance the two rivals, but neither party was satisfied.

Just before lunch on 8th September, 1944, the first German V-2 rocket struck south-east Paris. Seven hours later two more V-2s exploded in London. This led to consternation among the Allied staff. They had no way to counter this weapon. But given that

## "THE MOST DIFFICULT TASK, TAKING THE BRIDGE AT ARNHEN, WAS LEFT TO THE 'RED DEVILS'"

the V-2s were being fired from the Netherlands, Eisenhower switched his support to Montgomery's plan, which was codenamed Market Garden.

The plan was for three airborne divisions – one British and two US – to be dropped along a 100-kilometre-long corridor, which started at the front and extended all the way to Arnhem in the Netherlands. There, they were to take control of five bridges so that Allied armoured forces could advance over them.

"Just give me what I need and I'll reach Berlin and end the war," proclaimed an optimistic Montgomery.

**THE MOST DIFFICULT** task, taking the bridge at Arnhem, was left to the 'Red Devils', a crack unit of British paratroopers. 20 minutes after the vanguard had marked the landing sites, a triple column of aircraft, around 160 km long, thundered over the central Netherlands, dropping 20,000 men in parachutes and gliders. At the same time, the British XXX Corps launched its own offensive.

At first, the Germans had little to answer with. At Arnhem there was only one SS armoured division ►



# OPERATION MARKET GARDEN, 1944



**Prisoners of war led through Arnhem.**

▶ with 3,000 men, and many of them were some distance from the city. Facing the XXX Corps advance from the south were only a handful of lightly equipped German paratroopers who'd been hurriedly converted into infantry.

While a small German force of a few hundred men managed to hold back the bulk of the Allied paratroopers in Arnhem, SS General Wilhelm Bittrich issued orders to his two SS panzer divisions that would prove fatal to the Allies. The 9th SS Panzer Division Hohenstaufen were ordered to "reconnoitre in the direction of Arnhem and Nijmegen", holding the area and destroying troops to its west. The 10th Frundsberg Division was ordered to move to Nijmegen "to take, hold and defend the city's bridges".

**TANKS AGAINST PARATROOPERS:** it could only end one way. The British 2nd Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel John Frost initially managed to occupy the north side of the important bridge over the Rhine at Arnhem. But most of the paratroopers were driven out of the city and surrounded. In addition, Allied radio communications were hampered by the wooded terrain.

As various SS panzer troops moved to halt XXX Corps' advance at Nijmegen, the isolated British division's problems at Arnhem increased. They fought an ultimately futile battle against superior forces but did managed to prevent the Germans from sending further reinforcements south so that the Allies could capture Nijmegen on 20th September. The

## **"OF THE BATTALION'S 745 MEN, ONLY 16 WERE ABLE TO RETURN"**

British in Arnhem were nevertheless doomed. On the same day that Nijmegen was liberated, Frost's battalion at the end of the bridge was finally eradicated. One final radio message came from Frost's men that night: "Out of ammunition. God Save the King."

**OF THE BATTALION'S** 745 men, only 16 were able to return to their own lines. An attempt to rescue those in Arnhem by dropping a Polish parachute brigade south of the Rhine failed. 43 of the operation's 141 transport aircraft were shot down, and the Poles were unable to gather their forces until after dark.

The British armoured corps that had taken Nijmegen was less than 30 km from Arnhem. Despite this, all attempts to save the "Red Devils" were unsuccessful.

The Germans now bombarded their positions with huge amounts of artillery, especially the dreaded Nebelwerfer smoke mortar. British paratrooper Bill Brearley was one of the few to return alive from the Arnhem massacre. He recalled: "If you have never been frightened, you should hear those multi-barrelled mortars go off and then wait for them to arrive."

**The dreaded German Nebelwerfer.**





The German SS panzer division's attack in Arnhem continued until 26th September. The remaining 2,000 British had managed to flee across the river and reach their own lines at Nijmegen the night before.

Of the 10,000 men in the landed British division, nearly 8,000 were lost – dead, wounded or captured. In the ruins of the once picturesque Dutch town, the occupying power once again stood victorious. It was to last until 16th April, 1945, just three weeks before the end of the war, when the Allies finally managed to liberate the city.

**ALLIED INTELLIGENCE WAS** blamed for the defeat during Operation Market Garden. But when the British archives were opened many years after the war, it turned out that the blame had been misplaced. Throughout the war the Germans sent their military messages encrypted with Enigma machines. What they hadn't known is that the British – thanks in part to the Polish resistance movement – had come across one of the machines and were able to listen in to all the secret messages. This played a crucial role in many military operations – and could have done so at Arnhem.

Allied commanders wouldn't have been surprised that the Germans had two SS armoured divisions in the area near the air landing. British intelligence had already decrypted a German message on 4th September, 1944 that two SS panzer divisions were somewhere in the vicinity of Arnhem. On 15th September, the British also learned that an SS panzer corps had set up its headquarters in the village of Oosterbeek on the outskirts of Arnhem.

That the information on German tanks at Arnhem did reach Allied military headquarters is evidenced by the situation report issued on 16 September, the day before Operation Market Garden. There it was reported that "9th SS Panzer Division, and presumably the 10th, has been reported withdrawing to the Arnhem area". But what the paratrooper officers learned was something else entirely.

In the final report they received before the operation, the SS panzer divisions weren't mentioned at all. It was said they would only meet a mixture of "Hitler Youth and old men on bicycles", "a mixed bag of Jerry cooks and clerks", and "invalids from the Russian Front", according to various sources. ❖

**Christer Bergström** is a military history writer.

**Further reading:** *The Longest Day, A Bridge Too Far* (2019) by Cornelius Ryan • *It Never Snows in September* (1996) by Robert J Kershaw.

German tanks fire on a British platoon that has holed up in a house during the final days of Operation Market Garden.





**BAY OF PIGS, 1961**

# American failure in Cuba

**The Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1961 was supposed to remove Fidel Castro from power in Cuba, but John F Kennedy's reluctance to fully commit to the plan resulted in utter failure.**

Text: **MAGNUS VÄSTERBRO**

**J**ust before 06.00 on 15th April, 1961, eight Douglas B-26 Invader bombers flew towards the coast of Cuba. They were divided into three flights, each with a different Cuban airport or airbase as its target. The bombers had been repainted to look like they belonged to Cuba's Air Force (FAR), but in reality, they had flown in from a secret CIA airbase in Nicaragua, known as Happy Valley. The planes' crews were Cubans, but they had no love for Fidel



**The emblem of exiled Cubans' brigade.**

Castro's Communist regime. On the contrary, they were willing to risk their own and others' lives to restore Cuba's previous administration, which had recently been swept away in a bloody revolution.

**THE FIRST GROUP** to make it into Cuban territory was Gorilla Flight, which comprised two aircraft led by Captain Gustavo Ponzoa in Gorilla One. It swept towards its target, Antonio Maceo airport. Ponzoa had taken off and landed at the airport countless times as a pilot for Cubana Airlines before he'd defected. Heading towards the airport at low altitude, Ponzoa spotted a DC-3 from his old airline, but the sight didn't weaken his resolve. Bombs fell from his B-26. Gorilla Two swept in behind and dropped its own payload. The pair started firing their planes' guns. Civilian aircraft were split in two, a hangar exploded and was utterly destroyed.

The pilots, having achieved their mission, headed back to Nicaragua to await reports from the other

**Castro's soldiers investigate the wreckage of a B-26 Invader shot down over Cuba.**







**The US-sponsored invasion took place on the southern coast of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs.**

two flights. On balance, the news was good: two out of the eight planes had been shot down, but almost all of Cuba's fighter planes – 36 aircraft, according to CIA aerial reconnaissance figures – were believed to be destroyed. The agency was confident it could easily knock out the remainder in the next round.

Everything seemed to be going well for the plan's US backers. Castro would soon be without a functioning air force, a prerequisite for the next phase of the operation: the landing on Cuba's south coast in two days time, an event that would go down in history as the Bay of Pigs Invasion.

**HOWEVER, BEFORE THE** main event could begin, a strange interlude took place in Florida. A short while after Antonio Maceo airport had been bombed, a B-26 pilot, claiming to be a renegade from the Cuban air force, requested an emergency landing in Miami. Once on the ground, the pilot alleged that he was one of several FAR officers

who had spontaneously rebelled against the Communist regime that morning by bombing airports and airbases on the island. His statement emphasised that he and his colleagues had acted on their own initiative and without outside interference.

The credibility of the pilot's report was quickly questioned. First, despite its painted livery, the bomber didn't look like a FAR aircraft. Second, and most damning, the muzzles on the planes' guns were taped up. This was a measure used to keep dust out of weapons between missions, and something completely at odds with the pilot's account of having been in combat.

In fact, the entire incident had been staged by the CIA, who subsequently planned, financed and led the invasion. Not that anyone would admit it. The CIA tried to cover up what happened at the Bay of Pigs for 40 years, declaring that the landing was made by disaffected Cubans and was just another example of the internal strife that had plagued the island for many years.

Few believed them – not even at the time. Castro and his government were sure that long-anticipated US aggression was now underway. Cuba's military was placed on high alert and the issue was raised at the UN, with Cuban diplomats openly accusing the US of sponsoring the attacks on the airports and airbases. The ►

## STRENGTHS

 **Cuba**[illegible]

**Soldiers:** 225,000

(number in battle unclear).

**Losses:** Possibly up to 4,000.

 **Cuban exiles/US forces**

●●

**Soldiers:** 1,500

**Losses:** 190 killed, 1,200 prisoners (including 360 wounded).



**“The invasion was entirely planned, financed and led by the United States’ agency”**



## BAY OF PIGS, 1961

- Cubans won the opinion of most of the members, and the US soon faced criticism from around the world. This proved a decisive factor in what happened next.

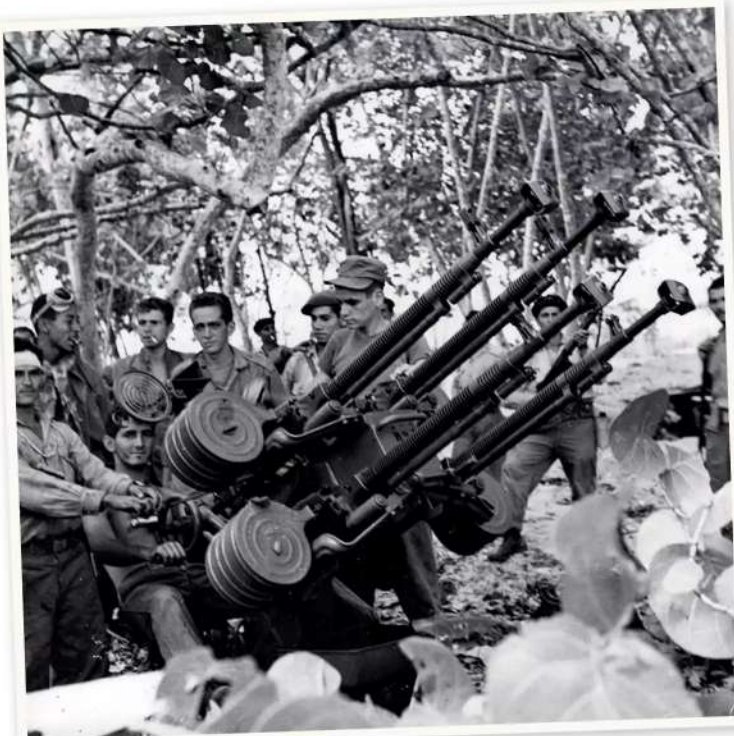
The US's newly inaugurated president, John F Kennedy, had deep reservations about the operation. Planning had begun during the presidential term of his predecessor, Dwight D Eisenhower, and although Kennedy gave his consent to the attempt to overthrow Castro, he was adamant that there must be absolutely no trace that the United States had ever been directly involved in the process.

Now, faced with widespread censure – and the threat of resignation from the US ambassador to the UN, who was angry at having been misled about the events – the president became even more cautious. As a result, crucial preparations for the invasion were never completed. The planned second round of airstrikes that were supposed to destroy any last remnant of Castro's air force was cancelled.

To make matters worse, it soon became clear that initial reports about the effectiveness of the first round of bombing had been wildly optimistic. Castro's air force was still fully operational. But no one warned the invasion force that sailed towards the coast of Cuba in the early hours of 17th April.

**THE INVASION FORCE**, which was known as Brigade 2506, comprised around 1,400 exiled Cubans, all willing to die for their cause. They also had support from the US Air Force and the CIA.

**Cuban soldiers man a quadruple 12.7-mm DShK anti-aircraft machine gun during the invasion.**



### **“Castro’s air force was still functioning and able to attack”**

The brigade would land in the Bay of Pigs, on the south coast of Cuba, under the cover of darkness and split into two units. The main force would head to Playa Girón on the east side of the bay, the second would march to Playa Larga, 35 kilometres to the north-west. At the same time, two groups of paratroopers would land around ten kilometres inland from the main force, just south of the Australia Sugar Mill at San Blas. The idea was that the paratroopers would control two more inlets to the Bay of Pigs, which was surrounded by marshland on all sides. This would provide sufficient cover for the main force to establish a bridgehead on the beach before Castro's troops had a chance to strike back.

This was the plan, but it wasn't what happened. The paratroopers who were due to land near Australia Sugar Mill ended up in the wrong place, their equipment disappeared in the swamp and the two groups failed to gather to block the road.

Even worse, the main landing was delayed. The CIA's air reconnaissance had failed to detect large coral reefs within the bay. As a result, many of the boats that were supposed to land the brigade's men and equipment – including several tanks and artillery pieces – ran aground and were damaged. When the sun rose over Cuba on the morning of 17th April, the landing was far from complete.

At 06.30, Castro's air force attacked. The cargo freighter, *Houston*, was hit hard and sank quickly, leaving soldiers and crew to swim ashore.

Worse was to come three hours later. A large store of fuel, along with ten days' ammunition, food and medical supplies was stowed on the *Río Escondido*, which also carried a large number of the brigade's men. At around 09.30, FAR Sea Furies and T-33s began firing rockets at the ships. One hit the *Río Escondido*, setting the fuel on fire and causing a series of explosions that sunk the ship.

But while these events were dramatic, their immediate consequences weren't catastrophic. Large parts of the brigade had been able to land and soon secured their positions. Far more devastating was the fact that Castro's air force was still functioning and able to attack the invasion force, which had little capacity to resist. The remaining vessels, which should have helped protect them and bring in more equipment, were forced to withdraw into international waters.

The brigade was now in a very vulnerable position. They had only limited air support and





were subjected to a constant stream of ground attacks. They also had limited ammunition and were targeted by frequent air strikes. For the rest of the day and the night, the brigade bravely fended off Cuban attacks, which were directed by Castro himself for much of the time. During the early hours of 18th April, Brigade 2506 was subjected to more intense attacks, which they managed to repulse, but they were slowly being pushed back as the opposing force grew and their ammunition supply dwindled.

The brigade repeatedly requested support from its CIA contacts throughout the 18th. An implied condition of the invasion for the Cuban exiles had been that the US would intervene if necessary – just as they had in Guatemala in 1954, when a CIA-backed coup there had failed. However, the Soviets had made it very clear to Kennedy that world peace would be jeopardised by any direct US intervention on Cuban soil. Not willing to escalate matters, the president was forced to watch and wait.

Pressed by his military advisors, the president finally relented in the early hours of the 19th, sanctioning US Navy jets to provide a limited escort between 06.30 and 07.30 to the brigade's remaining B-26 aircraft in the hope that they could resupply the brigade and take out some of Castro's heavy weaponry. But a fatal misunderstanding meant that the bombers reached Cuba an hour before the escort was in place. They were immediately shot down.

From this point, the invasion was doomed. At 14.32 on 19th April, the brigade commander, San

Román, sent his last radio message from Playa Girón, then ordered his men to smash the communication gear and any weapons that could not be carried. That done, the soldiers fled. The fight was over.

Three days after it had started, the Bay of Pigs Invasion ended with a victory and propaganda coup for Castro's Communist regime, which only increased in popularity as a result. Over time, every aspect of the invasion has come to be viewed as a dismal failure – not least, the CIA's preparation. But in reality, the invasion wasn't poorly planned. Had Castro's air force been knocked out as originally intended, the landing may have succeeded.

The real question is what the Americans' had hoped to achieve long-term. It seems unlikely that the US administration really believed that large sections of Cuba's population would rise up against the Communists. It's more likely that it planned to install a provisional government, which could then call on the outside world – and in particular, the United States – to intervene and deport Castro.

Instead, the events drove Cuba further into the arms of the Soviet Union, precipitating the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, which almost resulted in open warfare between the two superpowers. The Bay of Pigs fiasco also made Kennedy – who was by then desperate to make a show of US strength – step up the fight against world communism by escalating the country's efforts in Vietnam. 🇺🇸

**Magnus Västerbro** is a journalist and writer.

**In October 1962, Fidel Castro interviewed prisoners taken during the invasion for a TV broadcast.**

**Further reading:**  
**The Brilliant Disaster: JFK, Castro, and America's Doomed Invasion of Cuba's Bay of Pigs** (2011)  
by Jim Rasenberger.





**VIETNAM 1955–73**

# Vietnam's scapegoat

William Westmoreland always insisted that the US never lost a single battle in Vietnam – instead, it was defeated by its own politicians. The US commander never understood his tactics undermined support from the people back home.

Text: **ANDERS FAGER**

**G**eneral William Childs Westmoreland was called “a corporate executive in uniform”. In many ways, he became the symbol of what military historian Martin van Creveld called “Think-Tank War”, a war waged with forecasts, statistics and long meetings. Westmoreland himself later said that it was his destiny to lead the most unpopular war the United States had ever fought, and that his own government was preventing him from winning it. Historian Arthur Schlesinger called him “our most disastrous general since Custer”.

Westmoreland was born in Saxon, South Carolina, in 1914. His father ran a textile mill and later became a financier. The family were old Southern stock who had fought in the American War of Independence and the Civil War. No one was surprised, therefore, that young William wanted to become an officer.

Westmoreland might have been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, but he was also gifted. Whatever he did, he did it successfully, be it Sunday school, the Boy Scouts or officers' school.

He graduated from West Point in 1936 and was awarded the Pershing Sword as the class's outstanding pupil. Everyone predicted a bright

future for the tight-lipped lieutenant. His first placement was as an artillery officer, serving at Fort Sill, Oklahoma and Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. Westmoreland soon gained a reputation for being strict and meticulous but considerate of his men's welfare. He may have been rigid and unimaginative, but he found himself ahead of the curve, and was given a modern, motorised artillery unit to lead into World War II.

**IN 1942, WESTMORELAND** was sent to take part in the landing in North Africa. Everything went according to plan until the inexperienced US Army clashed with the battle-hardened German forces in November. As the war progressed, though, Westmoreland lived up to the high expectations he had established at West Point and was promoted.

He was on the front lines for the rest of the war; he fought in Sicily and took part in the Normandy landings. In the autumn of 1944, Westmoreland was promoted to colonel and chief of staff of the 9th Infantry Division, and in the spring of 1945, he participated in the fighting at the Remagen bridgehead and the encirclement of the Ruhr. The US Army's artillery was its ace in the hole. No





General William Westmoreland and President Lyndon B Johnson at a press conference outside the White House on 8th April, 1968.

matter what the tactically savvy Germans came up with, the Americans could simply send storms of fire raining down over them. Westmoreland was a skilled artillery tactician. That the Allies had won World War II with superior firepower naturally influenced his perception of how to wage war. In his mind, there were no problems that couldn't be solved with more artillery.

Westmoreland's wartime exploits had caught the eye of General Maxwell Taylor, who was to become one of the most powerful American military leaders in the 1950s. After the war, experienced commanders were needed to lead US airborne troops, and suddenly Westmoreland found himself placed with the paratroopers, first as regiment commander and later as chief of staff for the 82nd Airborne Division.

In 1947, aged 33, Westmoreland married Katherine Van Deusen, an officer's daughter he'd known since she was nine. The couple had three children.

**WESTMORELAND SERVED AS** commander of the 187th Airborne Regiment during the latter half of the Korean War. The war had stalled, with

## “Everyone predicted a bright future for the tight-lipped lieutenant”

US troops spending most of their time engaged in trench warfare and patrolling. Westmoreland made a solid, but ultimately insignificant, effort during the 18 months he led the regiment. In a notable incident, he nearly perished when he and his staff were shot at by their own artillery. He was known for his calmness and care for his soldiers: “He makes you feel like he's looking over your shoulder all of the time,” one battalion commander reported.

In 1953, Westmoreland was appointed brigadier general and was called home to the United States to take command of the Army personnel department. He became one of the Pentagon's workhorses and was named the Army's youngest major general in 1956. At 42 years old, Westmoreland was a shining star. His war-time commanders ruled the army, and the hard-working staff officer was their favourite. He was given command of the 101st Airborne Division and worked at West Point. In 1963, he became commander of the US Army's rapid deployment force – the XVIII Airborne Corps. ►



## GENERAL WESTMORELAND

► At the time, the “domino theory” was prevalent, which argued that allowing one nation in south-east Asia to adopt communism would see neighbouring nations rapidly turn communist. Westmoreland was engaged in strategic and operational issues within this context, aimed at stopping the spread of communism. He tried to understand the new type of warfare that was developing in Vietnam. How could you use America’s superior firepower against a guerrilla force? Could the French disaster of Dien Bien Phu in 1954 have been avoided with the help of transport helicopters and greater firepower? And was it possible to defeat guerrillas on the battlefield?

**AT THE END** of 1963, Westmoreland came to Vietnam, first as deputy commander and then, from June 1964, as commander of the rapidly growing US Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) in Saigon. At this time, US forces in Vietnam amounted to just over 15,000 men. Five years later they would number over 500,000. MACV was responsible for defending the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) against the Viet Cong guerrilla movement, which had the support of communist North Vietnam. MACV was in command of all US forces and, in practice, over the South Vietnamese army too.

Westmoreland was suddenly in the hottest location of the Cold War. He was a hard man in a difficult job, as one newspaper wrote, and he soon realised that he was not always a good politician. Collaborating with the thoroughly corrupt South Vietnamese government was “like trying to push a piece of spaghetti”, according to Westmoreland. It demanded endless patience, just like the war against the Viet Cong guerrillas. The general, who had previously relied on carpet bombing as his go-to tactic, was reluctant to try something else. From the outset, he was keen on a military solution to the conflict and refused to consider other, more diplomatic options.

Under Westmoreland’s leadership, the United States embarked on a war of attrition in Vietnam. The idea was to kill the guerrillas faster than they could train new soldiers, all while winning the confidence of the civilian population. There was some initial success when the guerrillas and North Vietnamese forces came to battle – they were easily routed and the plan seemed feasible. But the guerrillas soon learned to avoid open warfare, and the US’s large-scale pursuit of enemy soldiers led only to enormous destruction and civilian casualties.

Westmoreland had no illusions of a rapid victory, instead believing the war would take at least five years. At the same time, he willingly held press conferences to showcase his latest ‘progress’, which was largely measured in dead enemies or smashed

structures in far-flung corners of the jungle. He had also mastered the art of always appearing to be in control of the situation – a prerequisite for a successful commander. In 1965, he was named Man of the Year by *Time* Magazine. The handsome general with steel-grey hair and pilot sunglasses was “the sinewy personification of the American fighting man in 1965”.

**IN THE SPRING** of 1965, President Lyndon B Johnson ordered Operation Rolling Thunder, a sustained bombing campaign against North Vietnam, over the head of Westmoreland. It went on for three years and led to international protests with dubious results. With the support of the statistics-loving Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Westmoreland loyally pointed to the positive effects of the bombing. The campaign had undoubtedly destroyed many houses, he reasoned, and when the North Vietnamese no longer had houses, they would withdraw from the war.

Yet the mathematical models and tables so enamoured by Westmoreland and McNamara did not chart civilian losses, nor what effect the rampant bombing had on public opinion around the world. According to the tables, the US was winning the war, Westmoreland told President Johnson. As part of this, he also sought to extend the war to Laos and Cambodia and target the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was vital to the guerrilla forces.

Despite his unwavering belief in massive firepower, Westmoreland was always clear that the war against the Viet Cong would take time – guerrilla attacks must be expected until they ultimately tired or perished. The problem was that he never understood that it was his indifference to the civilian sacrifices his strategy required that undermined his support among the American populace. Westmoreland believed that America’s Achilles’ heel was its determination to win, but not at any cost.

**ON 30TH JANUARY** 1968, the Tet Offensive exploded throughout South Vietnam. Guerrilla attacks sprang up in previously secured locations, with the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops attacking on a broad front across Vietnam; guerrilla soldiers even attacked the US embassy in Saigon. News cameras captured the fighting, revealing to a stunned American public that US troops were nowhere near victory, in stark contrast to Westmoreland’s previous insistence that the enemy was nearly defeated. US and South Vietnamese forces managed to push back the offensive, but the damage was already done. Westmoreland may have won a tactical victory, but the public’s perception of such a setback resulted in eventual strategic defeat.



General Westmoreland inspects US soldiers from the 1st Division in Vietnam on 1st November, 1966.



The Tet Offensive shattered the American belief that it was possible to win the war in Vietnam. Although the guerrillas and North Vietnamese were slaughtered in their thousands, they nevertheless managed to embarrass the United States. American firepower had actually broken the Communist guerrilla forces, crippling their ability to launch another large-scale offensive, but it took several years before this was realised back home in the US. Five months after the Tet Offensive, Westmoreland was promoted to chief of staff and replaced by his West Point classmate, General Creighton Abrams. Westmoreland himself thought he had been “kicked upstairs”. The decision to replace him had been made long before, but in the eyes of the outside world it appeared the president had dismissed his man in Vietnam.

**WESTMORELAND ALWAYS INSISTED** that the US never lost a battle in Vietnam. Instead, the country had been hamstrung by its own politicians. While partially correct, this illustrates just how little he understood the importance of public opinion.

Westmoreland returned home at a real low point for the US Army to find himself being called a war criminal and made a scapegoat for many of Vietnam's casualties. And there were perhaps few men who were as well-suited to the role as the unimaginative, polite and ever-restrained Westmoreland. He assumed responsibility for all bombings, assaults and misjudgements under his command, always with the same stony face. Always with the same patience. He retired in 1972 and thus

**“He was keen on a military solution to the conflict and refused to consider other, more diplomatic options.”**

avoided being drawn into the United States' final defeat in Vietnam. He attempted a political career, running for governor of South Carolina under the Republican banner, but was unsuccessful in his bid for public office. Civilian decision-making was “astonishingly obscure”, he said. He also had problems relating to journalists operating under a free press system.

**IN 1982, THE** TV channel CBS showed the documentary ‘The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception’, which stated that Westmoreland had deliberately lied about the situation in Vietnam to appear more successful than he was. He sued CBS but the two sides settled before the trial proceeded. Just as in Vietnam, Westmoreland claimed that he had won.

Gradually, Westmoreland became a prominent spokesman for Vietnam veterans, largely because he never apologised for the war effort. His last big moment came in 1986, when he led a homecoming parade for veterans in Chicago. More than 200,000 soldiers followed their old commander.

In his final years, Westmoreland suffered from Alzheimer's disease and lived in a retirement home in Charleston. He died on 18th July, 2005, aged 91. He was buried at West Point Military Cemetery. 🇺🇸

**Anders Fager** is a writer and reserve officer.

**Further reading:**  
**A Soldier Reports** (1976) by William Westmoreland  
 ★ **The General who Lost Vietnam** (2012) by Lewis Sorley





A Mujahedin fighter in  
Afghanistan in 1989.



A person is shown from the waist down, wearing a tan uniform and holding a machine gun. They are standing on a rocky, arid hillside. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a blue sky with some clouds. The overall scene is a desert landscape.

AFGHANISTAN, 1979–89

# IMPOSSIBLE INVASION

When the Soviet army stormed into Kabul, everyone anticipated that Afghan resistance would be quickly pacified. But the vast and barren land is extremely suitable for guerrilla warfare – as the Mujahedin fighters demonstrated time and again.

Text: JONAS ÖHMAN



## AFGHANISTAN, 1979–1989

**T**he current situation in Afghanistan can largely be traced back to the war that the Soviet Union waged there in the 1980s – the last major conflict of the Cold War. The first half of this war was principally fought without media coverage, while the other half became overshadowed by political developments as the Soviet Union started to collapse. This makes the war, despite its size, relatively unknown.

The independent Afghan state had tried to stay friends with both sides during the Cold War. However, relations with its Soviet neighbour were far more extensive. In the second half of the 1970s, however, the country began to liberate itself from Soviet influence, which caused the Kremlin to react. In the spring of 1978, the Afghan Communist Party overthrew the incumbent president in the so-called Saur Revolution ('Saur' being the second month in the Persian calendar). Both the communists' political coup and their radical politics – not least in the area of land reform – provoked strong resistance and the organisation of a Muslim anti-communist guerrilla force, the Mujahedin, took shape.

As early as 1973, Afghan, fundamentalist Muslim leaders had sought refuge in Pakistan where they were protected and supported by the increasingly Muslim-dominated military government. Thus, what would later develop into the Taliban took

root in northern Pakistan long before the Soviet invasion.

The Afghan communist regime was strongly characterised by internal divisions, which in 1979 led to an internal coup where Hazifullah Amin took power. The domestic political situation was rapidly deteriorating, and the new prime minister kept asking the Soviet Union for military assistance.

**INITIALLY, THE KREMLIN** had no interest in intervening in Afghanistan but was instead satisfied with providing military equipment and financial assistance. It was the fear that Afghanistan might go the way of Anwar Sadat's Egypt – shifting allegiance to the United States – that eventually led to the Soviet Union intervening militarily. When it did get involved it had its own secret agenda, however: that was to replace Amin, who the Kremlin considered overly radical, with more moderate, Soviet-loyal Afghan communists.

The Soviet Union prepared thoroughly for this change of power. Staff from its main intelligence directorate (GRU) and soldiers from the 111th Guards Parachute Regiment were inserted into Afghanistan via the Soviet-controlled airbase in Bagram. In anticipation of a successful coup, they also brought along their incoming puppet leader, Babrak Karmal. KGB units consisting of Tajiks and Uzbeks – close neighbours of the Afghans – were sent to Kabul, ironically at the request of the about -to-be-deposed Hazifullah Amin, who wanted to

Six months after the 1979 invasion, the Soviet Union had deployed 80,000 soldiers to Afghanistan.





strengthen the watch around government buildings.

The invasion plan was approved on 8th December, and the Soviets launched an extensive mobilisation operation in those areas closest to Afghanistan. Around 50,000 men were rushed in for training, but many troops failed to complete this before the order to march came from Moscow.

**ON 25TH DECEMBER,** 1979, the Soviets began to fly paratroopers from Uzbekistan to the airbase in Kabul. From an air landing perspective, it was a rather complicated operation with a large number of transport aircraft that had to land, disembark both cargo and troops and then lift off again. After landing, the paratroopers were able to secure the airbase with relative ease and allow the 103rd Guards Airborne Division from Vitebsk to be sent in.

The storming of the presidential palace took place two days later, on 27th December. Supported by units from the 345th Guards Airborne Regiment, various types of special forces participated in the surprise attack, including the secret Alpha Group. The KGB's Spetsnaz units in Afghan uniforms infiltrated the Palace guard and were soon in a firefight with the outer security ring. After a brief but intense battle, with losses on both sides, Amin's guards surrendered. Amin was executed soon after, in unclear circumstances, and the Soviet Union installed Babrak Karmal as Afghanistan's new prime minister. At the same time, ground forces from the 40th Army began to cross the border in

## “A MUSLIM ANTI-COMMUNIST GUERRILLA FORCE, THE MUJAHEDIN, TOOK SHAPE”

the north via the two main roads. The initial phase was followed by general confusion and spontaneous uprisings in various parts of the country, including a massacre of Soviet advisers in Kandahar around the New Year. The slaughter prompted the Kremlin to send more forces to Afghanistan. Karmal made it clear that only Soviet forces were to be used to crush the resistance since he did not trust the regular Afghan forces. This turned out to be a correct assessment. Afghan soldiers soon began deserting in numbers from the government and in some cases also joined the rebels. This initial, relatively weak and disorganised resistance was quickly crushed by Soviet forces.

The Soviet Union had no plans for a more comprehensive campaign in Afghanistan. It was envisaged that the entire enterprise would develop in the same way as the invasion of Czechoslovakia, where no active resistance occurred, and the country was quickly brought to heel. The almost insignificant resistance coupled with the civilian population's inaction and a negative perception ►

VLADIMIR RODIONOV/RIA NOVOSTI



In the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union began to build up an Afghan army in hopes of reducing its own military presence in the country.



## AFGHANISTAN, 1979–1989

- ▶ of the Afghans' fighting spirit contributed to the assessment that it would all be an easy task. Orders from the Kremlin party leadership show, among other things, talk of eliminating bandit groups. But several crucial strategic factors were missing from the assessments.

The enormous cultural differences coupled with the extremely insensitive way that Soviet forces treated the civilian population quickly created tension on the ground. For example, soldiers boasted about urinating on mosque walls; entering homes where, according to tradition, only men belonging to the family could go; throwing copies of the Qur'an to the ground; and generally humiliating the Afghan people. This created an enduring hatred of all Soviet soldiers. Although geography, ethnicity, and a host of other factors made it almost impossible to talk about a unified guerrilla movement, the Afghan community began to support the Muslim guerrillas, which had as its explicit goal the eviction of the invading infidel.

In addition, the rugged terrain made it impossible to control large parts of the country. Nearly 80 percent of the territory was basically beyond Soviet control. This allowed the Mujahedin, despite their lack of weapons and other resources, to maintain a low-intensity guerrilla war without being disturbed, which would slowly wear down the Soviets.

**AFTER SIX MONTHS**, the Soviet Union had brought around 80,000 men to Afghanistan, a figure that would eventually increase to 100,000. However, the mechanised Soviet forces found it very difficult to take the fight to the guerrillas. The country's extremely primitive road network meant that any operation the Soviets mounted took an enormous toll on both vehicles and troops. Only their Central Corp had the mobile offensive capability to deal with the sporadic unrest and increasingly it acted like a 'fire brigade' as it dashed between incidents. The Afghan countryside and its inhabitants were a mystery to the soldiers, who also had trouble understanding what the invasion was about and why they were there.

The guerrillas realised very quickly that open combat against the well-armed and armoured Soviet forces was something that should be avoided. Initially, they concentrated on performing various

acts of sabotage against targets like the power grid, administrative buildings and Soviet military facilities. Occasionally, bomb attacks – of the kind that would become a signature of future conflicts in the region – were carried out in Kabul. Landmines of various types were also used extensively.

The Soviet Union had initially set out to give the Afghan army greater responsibility for the war, with its own forces in a secondary and supportive role. But it soon became clear that the value of regular Afghan troops in combat was extremely limited. Many soldiers had signed up solely for a pay cheque and were torn between duty and loyalty to their own ethnic groups. In addition, the Soviets had to rely on officers who had been loyal to the deposed Amin, since he had purged all non-loyalist officers prior to the invasion.

Meanwhile, the government Afghan troops were demotivated by the fact that they were often used as a kind of second-class, disposable, back-up force. While Soviet soldiers often remained in their armoured vehicles during battles against the enemy, the Afghans were often left exposed to shelling.

**AS TIME WENT** on, Soviet soldiers gained more and more evidence that they were ill-equipped to wage war in Afghanistan. The forces, drilled for battle in open terrain with various forms of ground and air support, had absolutely no training in fighting guerrilla forces. Officers demonstrated a very low tactical and strategic understanding of what a low-intensity, patience-sapping guerrilla war entailed. The centralised nature of Soviet command also discouraged initiative, so most simply adopted standard Soviet military practices, no matter how ill-suited they were.

Soviet infantry weapons were largely ineffective for the region. The intermediate-calibre AK-74 was designed for infantry fighting on European terrain, and proved extremely limited when the Soviets tried to use it over the longer distances or at the greater levels of elevation that fighting in the mountains demanded. Marksman training in such rugged mountain terrain was also lacking, and bumpy transport over poor roads often knocked the targeting mechanisms on the Dragunov sniper rifles out of alignment.

Few Soviet forces were equipped for combat operations in mountainous terrain, a specialist form of warfare that requires maximum stamina and an ability to exploit the terrain to the combatant's advantage. Paratroopers were forced to assume the task of hunting the guerrillas in the mountains, but they were repeatedly outmanoeuvred by an enemy who fired from advantageous positions and then simply disappeared. A lack of water also proved problematic during ▶

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**“THE RUGGED TERRAIN MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE TO CONTROL PARTS OF THE COUNTRY”**



Afghan guerrillas  
in the mountains  
in 1988.

The Soviet Union's  
invasion of  
Afghanistan began  
with an air landing on  
27th December, 1979.





## AFGHANISTAN, 1979–1989

► mountain operations. Fighting in mountainous terrain demands high standards for close-quarter and direct interaction between different types of forces. Armoured vehicles had extremely limited value, and were often left behind, stuck in the valleys below. The guns on the BMP-1 infantry fighting vehicle weren't capable of being angled sufficiently to attack forces in elevated positions. The artillery also had problems providing effective fire support. This was mainly because mobile fire support systems weren't used as part of Soviet formations; instead, they were controlled by high-ranking staff officers far from the front line. As a result, rocket artillery was often used in purely punitive expeditions where entire villages were levelled. The aim was to deter the Afghans from supporting the guerrillas while rendering the areas where they operated uninhabitable. Such efforts only served to increase civilian hostility towards the Soviets, however.

**Soviet special forces with a group of Mujahedin prisoners. Photo from 1987.**

**THE AFGHAN MUJAHEDIN**, who had been running around the mountains since childhood, learned over time to exploit the shortcomings of the Soviet forces and to strike where they were weak and unprotected. First and foremost, this meant disrupting supply lines. The few main roads, which were often in poor condition, offered endless opportunities for ambushes from hidden crevices and steep mountain cliffs. The guerrillas

constantly blocked the roads using various forms of traps (including mines), and Soviet forces had to spend enormous resources sweeping the roads clear of such threats. Not for nothing were truck drivers said to have the most dangerous job.

The guerrillas, on the other hand, became increasingly adept at solving their own supply problems. Rapidly expanding supplies from the outside were transported along routes established in the mountain passes. Soviet special forces eventually became quite good at infiltrating these areas and sabotaging supplies by attacking the caravans. But the guerrilla supply lines were often uninterrupted for long periods.

On several occasions, Soviet forces tried to take the initiative through more extensive territorial operations. In the years 1980-85, several major offensive operations were carried out with several divisions within the guerrilla-controlled area. For example, Soviet forces entered the infamous Pansjir Valley nine times during this time. During such operations, the guerrillas temporarily withdrew, and then returned when the Soviet forces eventually left the area.

Slowly but surely, the initiative was lost to an ever smarter and bolder resistance movement. The guerrillas also had the advantage of being able to easily melt into and disappear among the civilian village populations. Eventually, the Soviets learned to get close to convoys and set up ambushes around





A Soviet Mi-8 equipped with attack rockets fires on Mujahedin camps in February 1988.



suspect villages, catching the Mujahedin as they tried to leave. But the frustration of tracking an elusive enemy remained high and on occasions enraged Soviets massacred groups of civilians.

Atrocities occurred on both sides throughout the war. Soviet interrogation methods were often brutal. Occasionally, soldiers devised forms of ‘entertainment’ using captured Afghans. Eyewitnesses claim that special forces sometimes amused themselves by throwing Afghans into a pit, starving them for a few days and then dropping in boxes of tinned food, which the hungry prisoners had to fight for before trying to open the cans with their teeth. Some Mujahedin groups, in turn, would cut Soviet prisoners around their waist, then peel the skin up and tie it over their head, suffocating them with their own skin. Such treatment meant very few Soviet soldiers risked deserting. To further reduce the risk of defections, it was eventually decided that no soldiers of Muslim descent could serve in the war.

**INITIALLY, THE MUJAHEDIN** had no interest in taking prisoners of war. This changed somewhat after Soviet dissident groups began to convince the guerrillas of the political advantages of doing so. Different guerrilla groups regarded their captives in different ways during the war. Attempts were made to set up modern-day ‘Vlasov divisions’ with captured soldiers, but this proved impossible to implement as there was no trust between Soviet prisoners and the guerrillas. A situation that wasn’t helped because the guerrillas sometimes gang raped Soviet prisoners of war as a means of humiliation.

A crucial factor in the sustained and increasingly well-organised resistance was Pakistan, which

## “GRADUALLY, SUPPORT FOR THE MUJAHEDIN WAS STEPPED UP THROUGH PAKISTAN”

brought together the seven major guerrilla factions in 1985. Afghanistan’s south-eastern neighbour grew increasingly important as a refuge where the guerrilla fighters could reorganise, train and recover. It was also here that guerrilla supplies were stored before being transported into Afghanistan.

**AT FIRST, THE** United States was a relatively passive observer, offering the insurgents only limited support. On the one hand, there was disagreement on the best approach to engagement – wear down the enemy or aim for a decisive strike – and on the other, tensions between the White House and its advisors within Congress and the CIA meant the conflict was often used as a crowbar in domestic policy making. Moreover, the US had little time for the Islamist Pakistani military regime.

But, gradually, support for the Mujahedin was stepped up through a series of imaginative initiatives. For example, the US secretly purchased Soviet equipment from Israel and Egypt that was subsequently transported into Afghanistan via Pakistan. Soon Saudi Arabia also began supporting the guerrillas with money, after consulting with the US.

Less well known is the fact China also supported the guerrillas from its own neighbouring territory in Xinjiang Province – partly in tacit agreement, ►



## AFGHANISTAN, 1979–1989

- ▶ and partly in limited cooperation with the United States. Chinese weapons were based on their own experience of warfare under similar conditions and were therefore very well adapted to the challenges of the Afghan topography.

It should be mentioned that the weapons supplied to the guerrillas were of varying quality and not always usable. This was the case, for example, with initial attempts to equip the guerrillas with anti-aircraft capabilities. The British Blowpipe and SA-7 surface-to-air missiles plus Swiss 22-mm Oerlikon cannons proved to be of little use. The bulky shape of the launchers made them very difficult to transport while, due to effective Soviet defences, the missiles rarely hit their target. SA-7s even drew attention to the launcher because of the puff of smoke that appeared after firing.

**IT'S WORTH NOTING** that despite the Mujahedin umbrella term applied to them, the guerrillas were not a united force. Groups were largely set up based on local, ethnic roots. The resistance was strongest in the eastern parts of the country, where its Pashtun majority and warrior traditions were bolstered by its common border with Pakistan. In other parts of the country – for example, in the northern provinces, which were populated by various minorities whose traditions placed less emphasis on military prowess – recruitment was usually done by local leaders under the guidance of religious authorities. A typical guerrilla unit was led by a commander and could comprise around 300 men. The most well-known and

hardy commanders gradually gained the status of warlords, almost comparable to the medieval feudal lords. Some of the best known are Ahmad Shah Massoud – who managed to resist several Soviet offensives in the Panshir Valley – and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The latter was a major player during the most recent civil war in Afghanistan and is currently running for the presidency after being pardoned in 2016.


**WE SHOULD ALSO** mention the Arab Muslims who voluntarily joined the fight against forces that they viewed as infidels. Although not trained directly by the US (whose actual, physical presence in the region was extremely limited), they undoubtedly had the opportunity to develop their guerrilla warfare skills with the help of US resources. Moreover, they came into direct contact with the radical Muslim groups that had already established base camps in Pakistan. The best known of these travelling guerrillas was Osama bin Laden.

One of the lesser known aspects of the war were Soviet efforts – in cahoots with the Afghan state security service Khad – to exploit divisions in the resistance groups. This often came in the guise of cynical provocations whereby, for example, Soviet special forces were flown in to carry out regular massacres in villages located in the border area between different ethnic groups before vanishing

In 1989, the last Soviet forces rolled out of Afghanistan. They left behind a communist regime and a civil war.







just as quickly. Although such efforts had some success, they never created any major fissures in the resistance movement.

Khad, for its part, was controlled by one of the Afghan Communist Party's wings and did everything to sabotage its rival faction's domestic political influence, creating internal tensions in the Afghan administration. The Soviet leadership also found it increasingly difficult to control its installed prime minister Babrak Karmal. During his tenure, the state apparatus became increasingly corrupt and inefficient, further strengthening opposition to the puppet regime.

**IN TIME, HOWEVER,** Soviet troops finally learned how to exploit their military might. The 40th Army's composition gradually evolved from mechanised infantry to a significantly more mobile, airborne light infantry. In particular, the deadly Mi-24 attack helicopters began to reap some Soviet victories in the mid-1980s. With the help of patient intelligence efforts, they discovered how to use the helicopters to surround and neutralise important guerrilla leaders, often in collaboration with the special forces.

This new advantage was largely snuffed out when, in 1986, the CIA finally received the signal to deliver large numbers of portable US FIM-92 Stinger rockets – 150 a month. The sophisticated, heat-seeking missiles had no difficulty in neutralising the weapons deployed by the Soviet helicopters and strike aircraft of the period. Although the Soviet Air Forces eventually learned to deal with this threat,

## “THE SOVIET UNION NO LONGER APPEARED PURELY AS A RUTHLESS AGGRESSOR”

the Stinger played a crucial role at a critical phase of the war. They also became an important symbol for the guerrillas, who could now openly show the world that it challenged Soviet power with the blessing of the West. For their part, the Soviet Union got a taste of the power of the media. The country no longer appeared purely as a ruthless aggressor, but was also seen as a loser, which sapped at the army's perception of its invincibility.

**SOVIET STRATEGISTS HAD** already realised in 1980 that this was a conflict that would be very difficult to win. However, no clear initiative was taken until the second half of the 1980s, when leading military figures openly began to question the rationality of continuing the war. Finally, it was newly appointed Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev who initiated negotiations to end the conflict. On 15th February, 1989, the 40th Army's commander, Colonel General Boris Gromov, became the last soldier to leave Afghanistan.

During the war, the Soviet Union had an average of just over 100,000 soldiers in place in Afghanistan at any one time. In total, over 600,000 men served in the country during the ten-year duration of the war. Direct losses amounted to 14,500 men killed and 50,000 wounded. It could be added that over 400,000 of those serving in Afghanistan suffered some form of serious illness. On the Afghan side, there were approximately 250,000 guerrillas. Of these, around a third (75,000-90,000) fell. Afghan civilian losses are estimated to have been between one and two million.

After the withdrawal, the Soviet Union continued to support the communist regime with weapons. Contrary to what many had thought, the government significantly strengthened its fighting ability and managed to hang on after the end of the war as the resistance movement fragmented. But when the Soviet Union, after its empire collapsed in 1991, withdrew all support, the regime quickly fell. It paved the way for Taliban rule, and – a decade later – a fresh conflict, this time with Western forces. ❦

**Jonas Öhman** is a journalist, documentary director and translator in the Baltic and Eastern Europe.

**Further reading:**  
**The Soviet-Afghan War – How a Superpower Fought and Lost** (2001) by Russian General Staff  
★ **The Bear Went Over the Mountain – Soviet Combat Tactics in Afghanistan** (2010) by the Frunze Academy



# FATAL MILITARY BLUNDERS

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The first part of the paper discusses the importance of understanding the underlying mechanisms of the observed phenomena. It is crucial to identify the factors that influence the outcome and to establish a clear causal relationship. This involves a thorough review of the existing literature and a careful analysis of the data.

In the second part, we present the results of our experiments. We have conducted a series of tests to evaluate the performance of the proposed method. The results show that the method is effective in achieving the desired outcome, and it is robust to various perturbations.

The third part of the paper discusses the limitations of the current study and suggests directions for future research. It is important to acknowledge the constraints of the experimental setup and to explore the potential for further improvements.

Finally, we conclude the paper by summarizing the main findings and emphasizing the significance of the work. We believe that the proposed method has the potential to be applied in a wide range of contexts, and we look forward to future studies that build upon our work.



# Military blunders

Tactical errors, hasty decisions, communication breakdowns, poor intelligence, bungled strategies and sheer incompetence can all have disastrous consequences in war. Over the centuries, thousands of lives have been lost because commanders stubbornly stuck to fatal orders. Pride and wishful-thinking decimated Napoleon's Grand Armée in the lethal Russian winter of 1812, while George Armstrong Custer underestimated his opponent's strength and lost every man under his command to a vast gathering of Plains Indians. But these are far from the only examples: here we analyse 16 of history's biggest military blunders to reveal exactly what went wrong and why.

